

## Royal Australasian College of Surgeons Coat of Arms

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The design of the Arms began in 1927 with a draft by the noted antiquarian E. Wilson Dobbs. They were subsequently modified, mainly at the suggestion of Sir D'Arcy Power FRCS.

The arms can be divided into four principal parts: the shield, the crest, the supporters and the motto.

The shape of the shield is a fancy scalloped form which bears little resemblance to the piece of military hardware from which it derives. The division of the shield is also quite elaborate. At the top a golden sun rises. Below, the field is subdivided into four sections by a red cross, on which are set a lighted torch and two snakes swallowing their tails. In alternate quarters are a black swan and an ancient ship, known as a lymphad.

The symbolism of this convoluted arrangement is quite dense. The rising sun may represent the new dawn brought about by the founding of the College. The red cross dates back to the Crusades, when it was adopted as the sign of the Knights Hospitaller. The black swan and the lymphad represent Australia and New Zealand respectively. The torch is the *fax mentis* of the motto, and represents knowledge. The coiled snakes swallowing their tails are an ancient symbol for eternity. Brought together, the message of this portion of the Arms may be interpreted as:

"In the great tradition of western medicine, brought to the Antipodes from across the seas, a new dawn has broken for Australasian surgery by the founding of a College dedicated to knowledge, which shall last forever."

Above the shield is the helmet, surmounted by the crest. The type of helmet defines the estate of the recipient of the Arms. Since the petitioner, H.B. Devine, was at that time an esquire, the helmet is closed. The mantling, originally a cloth to protect the helmet from overheating in the sun, is small and decorative. The crest, originally the device which identified the occupant of the helmet, is here a sphynx. The College of Arms objected to its facing front, because the crest should face in the same direction as the helmet, which is in profile. This objection was however ignored. The figure is a conflation of the two ancient types of sphynx, the Greek and the Egyptian. The Egyptian version is a male head on a lion's body, with a pharaonic headdress, and is a symbol of power and vigilance. The Greek equivalent consists of a woman's head and breasts on a lion's body, usually with wings. The College's sphynx is clearly female, but is wearing the Egyptian headdress.

The meaning of this part of the Arms is, like the sphynx itself, mysterious. The sunburst behind the sphynx may indicate radiating knowledge. The ethnicity of the sphynx is on balance Greek, and the Greeks regarded the sphynx as a repository of arcane knowledge. The inclusion of the pharaonic headgear may be an attempt to combine the qualities of both types, but on the other hand it may be little more than an example of Egyptomania, a well-documented craze which swept the western world following the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb in 1925.

The Greek sphynx was not a particularly edifying character. She sat on a rock near the city of Thebes, asking a riddle of all those who passed that way. The unfortunates who failed the test (everybody) she tore to shreds, until Œdipus (another character with a serious problem) came by and answered her correctly, whereupon the sphynx shrieked hysterically, and in an insane fury threw herself over a cliff.

The supporters of the shield are Chiron (left) and Apollo (right). Chiron was a centaur, a creature half-horse and half-human. In Greek mythology centaurs invariably represent the forces of barbarism, but Chiron is the exception. He is a great and wise teacher, educating demigods and heroes including Asklepios and Achilles in the arts and sciences. He is a pivotal character in ancient mythology, representing the choice between barbarism and civilisation which all individuals and societies have to confront.

Apollo was one of the twelve gods of Olympus. In his purest form he is the embodiment of the rational and civilized aspect of the human character. In these Arms however he is depicted as a musician, wearing a tunic and carrying a musical instrument (which looks more like a Welsh harp than a lyre). This may be to disguise his dark side, evident in the story by which he is associated with medicine.

One of Apollo's numerous affairs was with a princess named Koronis. She fell pregnant, but Apollo was suspicious of her, and sent a snow-white crow to watch over her. Shortly before the birth of the child she fell in love with a mortal man. The crow brought this news to Apollo. In a fit of rage Apollo cursed the crow and turned it black, then took his bow and shot Koronis. Finally he tore the unborn child from the dead mother's womb and gave it into the care of Chiron. This child was Asklepios (Æsculapius), who became the tutelary deity of medicine and healing. (An alternative version of the story tells that the child was delivered by Hermes at Apollo's command, by Cæsarian section.)

Most mythological figures have a dual nature, a mixture of good and evil which reflects the reality of the world from which they were derived. In an attempt to accentuate the positive, the fashioners of the College Arms have made the message somewhat obscure, as in the case of Apollo, who as leader of the Muses, has little to do with surgery. But heraldic and iconographic deficiencies notwithstanding, the Arms do represent in symbolic terms the traditions and ideals which the founders of the RACS sought to honour and emulate, and these values remain as valid for the College today as when the Arms were designed.

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