

PROFILE

## David Michael Cockburn OAM

Educator, entertainer, innovator, legend

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The recently appointed executive director of the Victorian Division of Optometrists Association Australia telephoned David Cockburn to arrange to meet him so he could learn more about the history and aspirations of the profession. Recently retired after 50 years in practice, David asked why he had chosen to meet him. The reply was 'I am told you are a legend in the profession'. David replied that legends are stories that people believe but are not true.

It is true that David is a legend, as this profile will show. His reply also shows that he is a smart Alec, as this profile will also amply confirm.

### Who speak the tongue that Shakespeare spake

—Wordsworth

David spent the final two years of his schooling at Melbourne Church of England Grammar School, because his father thought it might enhance his career prospects if he had a bit of private school polish. There he was taught Shakespeare by an English master, whose method was to read it to the class without comment or explanation, while the class silently followed from their own copies. This was not very interesting, so David talked in class. When brought to attention by the question 'Cockburn, what did I just say?', Cockburn was able, by dint of a remark-



**David M Cockburn**  
OAM DSc hc MSc Optom

able memory and the ability to parallel process, to recite the last dozen lines of Shakespeare that had just been read. He can still recite Shakespeare at length, as well as pages of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, also learned at school.

David was born in 1925 in Swan Hill, Victoria. His parents worked a Mallee farm in Chillingollah, 40 kilometres North West of Swan Hill, which meant a long pre-natal journey for David and his mother to the Swan Hill hospital by horse and dray.

His father had served as a lieutenant in the First World War, winning the Military Medal in France and after the war had

taken up farming under a soldier settlement scheme. These schemes were not very successful so it is not surprising that the family sold the farm and moved to Melbourne when David was still very young. His father left the family shortly afterwards, so if nurture determines the man, rather than genes, then credit for David's later success must be given to his mother, whom David describes as capable, loving, practical and loyal.

David does not give much credit to his schools, either Hampton High or Melbourne Grammar, because he was at school during the first four years of the Second World War and both schools suffered teacher shortages. At Hampton High School, teachers changed constantly as they successively enlisted for the war and at Melbourne Grammar, the teachers were too old and crusty for active service.

On leaving Melbourne Grammar at the age of 16, having completed his Leaving Certificate but without having studied physics or chemistry, David obtained employment as a laboratory assistant with Imperial Chemical Industries. He thinks his father may have arranged this, as his father had connections through his between-wars employment with the Returned Serviceman's League and was then back in the army as a captain. David was assigned to work in ICI's No. 5 Explosives Factory in the western suburbs of Melbourne.

On his own initiative and not as a requirement of his employment, he enrolled in a diploma course in chemistry

at the Melbourne Technical College,<sup>a</sup> which required attendance four nights per week.

### **You all may be rulers of the Queen's navee**

—WS Gilbert

After completing a year and a half of the chemistry diploma course, David enlisted in the Royal Australian Navy in June 1943 at the age of 17, for no better reason than that everyone else was enlisting. He chose the navy because his family had settled in the Melbourne seaside suburb of Hampton and he had spent a great deal of time sailing on Port Phillip Bay in a sailing boat owned by one of his better-heeled school friends.

After six weeks training on HMAS Penguin in Sydney, he embarked on HMAS Kapunda for New Guinea and shore duty as a naval supply assistant in HMAS Basilisk, the Port Moresby naval shore depot.

He had wanted to be a deck sailor but was assigned to Supply because of his defective colour vision. He knew he had a colour vision defect from the systematically wrong titrations he did in his chemistry classes at RMIT. Being a smart alec, he learned the correct answers to the Ishihara test but he was caught out by the lantern test.

During his training in record-keeping, great emphasis was given to the importance of the ledger sheets on which purchases and issues were recorded. This was a lesson David absorbed well, so well that he always completed his training exercises in pencil and retained the sheets for future use. This proved invaluable in balancing the stores ledgers on board ship. Missing items did not need to be accounted for because replacement ledger records omitting the missing items could be prepared using the ledger sheets salvaged from his training exercises.

David was promoted to Leading Sup-

ply Assistant and in September 1945 he was assigned to a real ship, HMAS Rockhampton, a corvette in the RAN 20th mine sweeping flotilla. The war had just ended, so the ship's duties were mine sweeping, returning former prisoners of war home and bringing Japanese suspected war criminals to face trial.

One of the officers to whom David reported quickly diagnosed him as a smart alec, with good reason, and gave him a hard time. Good fortune enabled David to change the balance of power between them. David had been disciplined for a real or imagined offence by this officer with a penalty of seven days stoppage of leave. The ship was docked in its Australian home port at the time and undeterred by his stoppage of leave, David went ashore to see his girlfriend, bearing supplies of navy salmon to ingratiate himself with her family. The girl's mother sent her and David to visit her aunt to swap some of the salmon for sugar, because sugar was needed for the home brew in the family bath tub. The aunt apparently had a reliable source of supply of precious war-time rationed sugar. It was a long walk prolonged by amorous dalliances and when David and girlfriend finally arrived at her aunt's house, it was very late at night. There in the house, clad in brief night attire, was the officer responsible for David's shipboard problems. Over an awkward cup of tea, during which neither David nor his officer acknowledged they knew each other, it became clear that the latter was the steady source of the sugar, in return for favours of which the aunt's absent husband would not have approved.

David's fortunes at sea turned for the better after this episode, although it is ironic to note that one of his service fitness reports reads 'reasonable worker but lacks initiative'. Subsequent events would show just how wrong this assessment was.

David was discharged in October 1946 at the age of 21, a year after the war had ended, never having fired a 'shot in anger' or having had a shot fired at him. This is not precisely true because he did sleep through an air raid on Port Moresby and his ship did engage in a furious attack on

a plane flying over the convoy at dawn, a plane that turned out to be one of their own. However, his years of risk at sea and in Papua in war-time were recognised by the award of the 1939–1945 Star, the Pacific Star, the General Services Award and the Australian Service Medal 1939–1945.

### **After the war is over**

—Second World War song

On returning to civilian life, David applied to do a Bachelor of Science degree at The University of Melbourne under the post-war Commonwealth Rehabilitation and Training Scheme but his application was rejected by the University because he did not have the prerequisite leaving certificate pass in a foreign language.<sup>b</sup> Disappointed, he re-enrolled to resume his chemistry studies at the Melbourne Technical College. Then he received a letter from The University of Melbourne, asking why he had not attended the orientation studies. Asking no questions about the conflict between the two letters, he immediately commenced attending the science course subjects at the university. It was not until third term that the irregularity of his enrolment was discovered when the university had no choice but to admit its mistake and to confirm his enrolment.

His love for the sea was not diminished by the boredom and vexatiousness of serving in the navy. He continued to live by the sea in Hampton. He built his own yacht and for many years competed cunningly on Wednesdays and Saturdays out of the Sandringham Yacht Club. He now lovingly owns a 12-metre Salar 40 but is not so competitive.

The sea was to influence the course of his life in other important ways. He courted Barbara MacKenzie, daughter of the chairman of the Melbourne Harbour Authority and some-time commodore of the Sandringham Yacht Club.<sup>c</sup>

a. The Melbourne Technical College became the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in 1954 and was given university status in 1992. It began as the Working Men's College in 1887 and became a Technical College in 1934.

b. His school leaving subjects were a strange mix of English, mathematics, geography, economics and drawing, not a good foundation for a future career based in science.

c. They were married in 1951, the year after David completed his optometry qualification.

Then, one summer's day in 1947, having completed the first year of his science course, David was standing on the Sandringham jetty and chanced to help a yacht to dock. On the boat was John Nathan. John and David had been at Melbourne Grammar School together but their paths had not crossed since then. They asked each other 'What are you doing these days?' John said he was an optometrist, having qualified three years earlier.<sup>d</sup> David asked 'What's optometry?' and was well enough impressed by the answer to transfer his studies from science to optometry.

He enrolled in the second year of the optometry course provided by the Victorian (then Australian) College of Optometry in 1948 and completed his Licentiate of Optometric Science at the end of 1950. Optometry was never to be the same again.

David established the Optometrical Students Society in August 1948 with his fellow student and friend Derek Gardiner<sup>e</sup> and was its inaugural president, with Derek as secretary. Interestingly, students more than a decade later recognised his role and elected him an honorary life member of the society. The newly formed society was interested in more than just social activities.<sup>1</sup> It affiliated with the University Student Representative Council and established a relationship with the University Medical Research Group. It offered criticism of some subjects of the course and sought, unsuccessfully, to have a representative on the college's education committee.<sup>2</sup>

The students were concerned about pro-

fessional ethics and met with the professional association on this. They campaigned for the election to the Optometrists Registration Board of optometrists who would oppose recognition of the British optometry qualification, because the students felt recognition of British qualifications would provide a supply of manpower for large optometric companies that were not professional in their mode of practice. The Students' Society wrote a letter to optometrists on this matter and did so using the college address. The college council objected to their partisan participation in professional politics and the unauthorised use of the college's address, threatened expulsion of the student leaders from the course and directed that the Students' Society send a retraction. The students then quickly drank their surplus funds so they could say they did not have the financial means to send the retraction, which indeed was never sent.

On completing the optometry course, David immediately established his own private practice in his mother's house in Hampton. It was a highly professional practice that was to be built on professional reputation, without resort to get-rich-quick advertising or multiple locations, so it was a slow beginning despite the home town advantage that he enjoyed. However, the practice steadily established its reputation with the community and local medical practitioners, a reputation that extended far beyond the borders of the local suburb. Patients travelled from all parts of Melbourne and even interstate to see him. The practice grew to have four optometrists, of whom three were partners.

David's activism as a student soon turned to an interest in the politics of his profession. In 1951, his first year in practice, he was elected a councillor of the Victorian Division of the Australian Optometrical Association (then the Victorian Optical Association). Two years later, he was appointed to the Optometrists Registration Board. However, these forays into professional affairs were not sustained. Regular meetings, endless talk and not much progress were not David's metier, although he served on the AOA council for six years and the ORB for four.<sup>f</sup> They could not

compete with the good life he enjoyed—a satisfying and growing practice, a wife and three children, a yacht in the Sandringham Yacht Club marina, a nice house in a shady tea tree-lined street bought with cheap Veteran's Affairs finance, all within walking distance.

The good life was ruffled only by some disputes with the local city council. The council had reneged on its advice that he could practise optometry in a house he had purchased a few doors away from his mother's house where he had set up practice. Then the council gave approval to use part of a public open space opposite David's house for a car park.

This aroused the combative instincts of the 33-year-old naval veteran, who stood for election to the city council in 1959 and was elected Mayor of the City of Hampton in 1963. Being mayor brought appointment as a Justice of the Peace, an appointment David still holds. It is a largely titular office these days but in the 1960s, it required the discharge of important civic duties.<sup>g</sup>

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f. He served a second term on the Optometrists Registration Board from 1985 to 1990. This was as a result of an error of judgement. He allowed himself to be nominated so that a particular candidate for election whom he did not support would not be elected unopposed and he had planned to withdraw his nomination if others nominated to contest the election. He found too late that he could not withdraw his nomination after the close of nominations and because he was so well known, he was elected, much to his annoyance. This was at the time that the advertising regulations of the act were being challenged by some optometrists who set up subsidiary dispensing companies to advertise on behalf of their optometric practices. The ownership law in the Act was also being challenged by the same means. These battles for professional regulation were lost eventually in the name of economic rationalism, even though David fought for the principles of professional integrity with valour during this second five-year term on the board.

g. Justice of the Peace is an office that dates back to 12th Century England. Originally, Justices of the Peace were appointed by the monarch to keep the peace but these days their only function is the witnessing of documents. Prior to 1965, a JP's duties included conducting out-of-court bail hearings, sitting at Magistrates' Courts to hear various summary offences, conducting committal proceedings and issuing search warrants to the police. David enjoyed the challenges of these duties.

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d. John Nathan was to become Director of Studies at the Victorian College of Optometry in 1950, a post he held for 14 years. This was a part-time and honorary position and John practised optometry full time. During his time as Director of Studies, he facilitated the creation of a degree course in optometry in The University of Melbourne that superseded the diploma course of the college. He also initiated the first research program in the college. Subsequently, he was president of the college from 1970 to 1978. See *Clin Exp Optom* 2001; 84: 91-93 for a profile of John Nathan.

e. Derek Gardiner was a fellow shipmate on HMAS Rockhampton and David had persuaded him to do optometry with him.

David stepped out of local government in 1964: civic affairs were not to be a life-long interest any more than professional association politics. Ideas and knowledge and doing something with them has been his real passion.

### Knowledge comes, wisdom lingers

—Tennyson

David did not just sail his yacht for fun; he had to learn the science of sailing. Celestial navigation is not needed to sail the confined waters of Port Phillip Bay but David had to become an expert and was chief instructor in celestial navigation in his yacht club for six years.

Likewise, he was unable to stand still in the practice of his profession. He was among the first optometrists to prescribe and fit contact lenses and he developed an interest in diseases of the eye very early in his clinical career. He volunteered to work in the ophthalmological out-patients clinic of the Alfred Hospital and worked a weekly session there for several years.<sup>h</sup> He wanted better records of his patients with ocular disease so he salvaged a Bausch & Lomb indirect ophthalmoscope and converted it to a retinal camera. He carefully adapted the optics and systematically developed the procedures that would give high quality photographs. He published a paper about the adaptation in the *British Journal of Physiological Optics*.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1950s, ophthalmology made much of the dangers of glaucoma to fuel community anxiety about blindness so it could press its competitive advantage over optometry, which at the time did not measure intra-ocular pressure. IOP was considered to be the definitive diagnostic test, so non-glaucomatous ocular hypertensives endured years of unnecessary miotic therapy.

The Registration Act prohibited optom-

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h. He reports with wry amusement that he was given the title of 'doctor' in the hospital because in those days ophthalmologists were addressed as 'mister' because they were surgeons. One of the senior ophthalmologists at the hospital was very anxious that no one should think the assertive and confident optometrist was an ophthalmologist, so he always introduced David as Doctor Cockburn.

etrists from using drugs for the purpose of measuring the powers of vision and this was widely interpreted as precluding use of topical anaesthetics needed for tonometry. Therefore, optometry explored the use of tonometers that did not need corneal anaesthesia, including the Wolfe scleral tonometer. David taught himself Schiötz tonometry and did a comparison of scleral and Schiötz tonometry on pigs' eyes and on a prospective series of his own patients with and without glaucoma. He showed that the scleral tonometer did not compare favourably with the Schiötz. The published paper<sup>4</sup> is a model of scientific planning and exposition, yet the research was done and the paper written without formal research training or expert supervision. In the same year, he published a review of glaucoma in the *Australian Journal of Optometry*, so he could share with his colleagues what he had learned about this disease.<sup>5</sup>

Glaucoma has remained a life-long interest. He has published 17 papers on glaucoma and contributed chapters on the subject to two major text books.<sup>6,7</sup> He contributed an invited review on the enigma of glaucoma to the *American Journal of Optometry and Physiological Optics* in 1985. Several of his reviews have proposed diagnostic and referral decision-making protocols based on the knowledge of glaucoma at the time.

While some of his glaucoma papers are reviews, many are reports of his own systematic chair-side research. He has conducted a number of studies of risk factors in glaucoma, including ocular hypertension, posterior embryotoxon and pseudoexfoliation, as well as prospective studies of the effectiveness of glaucoma treatment.<sup>8</sup> His research on anterior angle assessment published in the *American Journal of Optometry and Physiological Optics*<sup>9</sup> was also submitted for a masters degree, which was awarded to him in 1979.

His other research interest has been the interface between the eye and systemic disease. His published work includes 18 papers on this subject, some are reviews, some case reports and others are reports of chairside research. One of the papers appears in the pres-

tigious medical journal *Stroke*<sup>10</sup> and he has contributed a chapter on this subject to a major text book.<sup>11</sup>

### Gladly wolde he lerne, and gladly teche

—Chaucer

The heading is a reminder that for all his talents, David cannot spell. Even word processing did not help because he would fail to recognise misspellings and add them to the spell checker vocabulary. Despite this handicap, David was appointed a part-time clinical instructor in the Victorian College of Optometry in 1957 and he continued teaching for the next four decades.

He did so gladly and generously, initially in the teaching clinic but for most of his teaching career, as lecturer, tutor and clinical demonstrator in diseases of the eye. He gave a day of his time each week to undergraduate teaching but he was equally generous with his time in giving continuing education for his colleagues.

He enjoyed teaching, seeing it as a challenge to persuade students and colleagues alike to think differently, adopt new clinical procedures and question every old tenet.

In 1957, in his first year of teaching, he decided that students should, for the first time, be taught tonometry. He assembled his fellow clinical instructors so they could learn the technique by practising on each other. Keen to avoid the risk of corneal infection, they sterilised the tonometers with Zephrein and carefully rinsed them. However, the Zephrein had been drawn up the tonometer barrel and all the clinicians had their corneas branded with a painful chemical burn. Teaching students tonometry was delayed a few years.

Optometrists did not have slitlamps when David started in practice. The college had one that no-one could use and students were given a few meagre lectures based on Doggart's text book. David bought his own second-hand slitlamp in 1953 and after he had taught himself how to use it, he brought it to the college each week to teach students.

He also challenged us to do binocular indirect ophthalmoscopy and gonioscopy,



techniques that have been embraced by optometrists only in the past 20 years. He purchased his own Schultz-Crock BIO as soon as it came on the market in the mid-1970s and soon after used gonioscopy in his practice.

He promoted our role in the detection of systemic disease. He wrote about the assessment of diabetic retinopathy 25 years ago<sup>12</sup> and he tried to get us to measure blood pressure, listen for carotid auscultation with a stethoscope and to measure blood glucose.

David is an entertainer as well as a teacher. Many of us can recall his sudden collapse at the lecture podium and when we leapt to our feet in alarm, he would rise from the podium floor saying that was a drop attack and proceed to tell us about TIAs. When teaching lacrimal lavage, he would volunteer his own lacrimal duct to his third-year students to show that the procedure was safe and painless. In 1976, he was invited as visiting professor to the school of optometry in the University of California at Berkeley, because they wanted his enthusiasm and confidence to help promote the use of the diagnostic techniques that were once the preserve of ophthalmology.

Because he was entertaining, knowledgeable and always saying we should be doing new things, he was in great demand at professional conferences for more than 30 years in Australia and at several overseas venues. Only Agatha Christie's *Mouse Trap* has had a longer run. His most recent professional conference was in Hobart in 1998, where at the age of 74 he organised, chaired and lectured in a conference on diabetes. He still holds a senior adjunct appointment in the Department of Optometry and Vision Sciences in The University of Melbourne, which confers on him the title of Associate Professor.

He continues to be an active member of the Editorial Board of this journal. It is he who writes most of the often witty and always informative mini abstracts in each issue. He was topic editor for the special issue on glaucoma published in May 2000 and the special issue on diabetes published in March 1999.

## Quit while you are ahead

—Line from David Cockburn's sick joke  
David had no love for committees: he was impatient with the process and with many of his fellow committee members. Despite this aversion, he served on the council of the Victorian College of Optometry for 13 years from 1954 and was its treasurer from 1958 to 1966. He stayed because this was a period of action and success: the college had appointed a full-time academic staff member for the first time, it had moved into its own new building near The University of Melbourne and the university had established a degree course in optometry that was being taught in conjunction with the college.

David decided not to seek re-election to the college council in 1967. However, this respite from council was to be short-lived. The next move forward for the profession was to enhance its capacity for research. David agreed to my request that he chair a fund-raising venture to establish a new research facility. He and I, with Jean Colledge, the secretary of the college, toured Australia for two years, holding fund-raising dinners throughout Victoria and then in each state capital.

During the two years of fund raising, Jean Colledge and I had to patiently listen to countless repeats of David's very sick joke about quitting while you were ahead. He would remind optometrists that the profession had made great advances over recent years and the illustrative joke was of the couple who had a child born without a body—it was just a head—but whom they loved greatly. When a fairy godmother arrived to grant a wish, their wish was that their child should have a body so that it could play like normal children. The wish was granted and the child ran outside and over the road to play in the park, only to be killed by a passing car. Although the story suggested it may be best to quit while you are ahead, David's message was that we should not. A very sick joke but it worked.

Our colleagues saw the need for the profession to continue its advances and not be content with the success of recent years. We raised today's equivalent of \$2 million, enough to buy four properties adjoining

the college and to build the laboratories of what was to be the National Vision Research Institute of Australia. We set up the institute in 1972 and David chaired its board for the next 17 years. The institute is autonomous but is part of the Victorian College of Optometry so the chairman of the institute's board had an ex-officio place on the college council. This put David back on the council for another 17 years, hating every moment of it.

## Little learning is a dang'rous thing

—Pope

There was still more to do. There was clear need for a culture of lifelong learning in optometry because of rapidly changing knowledge, new technology and an expanding scope of practice. No longer could a little learning gleaned from a four-year course serve a career life of clinical practice.

In 1975, the college council decided there should be a Board of Continuing Education to provide systematic and diverse programs of continuing education for optometrists, rather than rely on episodic state or national conferences. David agreed to be the foundation chairman of the board, a position he held for the next 15 years. He did not just chair the meetings but provided most of the ideas and gave many of the lectures and courses.

The program devised was truly diverse: it comprised monthly evening lectures, a monthly newsletter which included practice guidelines, an audio-visual postal service for optometrists who could not easily come to the college, several specific-topic courses a year and dozens of clinical workshops to teach new techniques.

David promoted the idea of mandatory continuing education. More than 25 years ago, in 1976, he argued the case in a conference organised by the Monash University Centre for Continuing Education.<sup>1</sup> The culture of career-long learning is now so well accepted that it is hard to imagine that it was once strongly opposed. The arguments were varied: that a legal imposition to do continuing education was an affront to professional freedom, that formal continuing education was not

effective, that it would be too costly for practitioners and required too much time.

Four years later, opinion was divided in the profession even though the National Office of the Australian Optometrical Association had formally decided at its Triennial Policy Conference that the state divisions should work toward legislative change to the optometry Acts to require optometrists to do continuing education as a condition for annual reregistration. David Cockburn, as chairman of the Victorian College of Optometry's Board of Continuing Education, engaged in meetings over several years with the Australian Optometrical Association Victorian Division to find a mutually agreed strategy. He also did everything he could to change the attitudes of individual members of the profession. Gradually, the tide of opinion changed and the college, and then the association, adopted continuing education requirements as a condition of membership of their respective organisations. More important, perhaps, was the change in the culture in the profession toward continuing learning that occurred over those years of debate.

### Blushing honours thick upon him

—Shakespeare, *Henry VIII* ii 352

The College recognised David's exceptional contribution to the profession by electing him an honorary life member in 1975, although optometry students were more quickly perspicacious, as often they are, having given him that honour in their society 15 years earlier.

In 1982, David was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia and in 1987, he was admitted by The University of Melbourne to the degree of Doctor of Science *honoris causa*.

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