

Tribute

Professor Barry Leighton Cole AO retires

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Time and tide waits for no man, not even Barry Leighton Cole, former Director of the Victorian College of Optometry and Foundation Professor of the Department of Optometry and Vision Sciences, The University of Melbourne. There are few in Australian optometry who have not known Barry. His influence has been widespread, far beyond Victoria and far beyond Australia.

To summarise his achievements could not do him justice, to attempt to recount them in detail would take many pages. After all, he has been an academic since 1959 and has been a leader in education and research for more than 30 years. Throughout this period he has had a vision of what optometry should be and without respite has pursued this vision relentlessly and imaginatively.

In 1959 when Barry Cole was first appointed to a full-time lectureship at the College, and his was the first such appointment, it was thought he was a young man with the right ideas and promising potential. Yet how many persons of potential fail to develop fully, through adversity or through lack of will or just early burn-out? Barry brushed aside such restraints and in so doing has inspired two generations of young people to approach their professional lives in a similarly positive manner.



Adversity was encountered early. At the time he took office, the college occupied a small rented area in an unpretentious Collins Street building. The budget was barely sufficient to pay him a living wage. There was a clinic moderately well-equipped according to the standards of the day but there was a meagre supply of patients, even fewer students, no laboratory space and no library other than a locked bookcase housing a few dusty journals and faded books. Who held the key was something of a mystery. While the licentiate diploma course provided by the college was loosely associated with the university, there was no niche for the discipline within the university proper. Optometry was not made to feel particularly welcome, particularly in the face of extraordinary opposition from ophthalmology

through the medium of the Faculty of Medicine. It must be remembered that this was well before PRK and IOL surgical procedures—even before common usage of the slitlamp and binocular ophthalmoscopy.

Within three years, with the help of some enthusiastic councillors, Cole had achieved a new building in the proximity of the university, a degree course within the newly founded Faculty of Applied Science, and the nucleus of a research school. Significantly during all of this activity there was a minor influx of students of unusual potential.

Since these years in the early '60s, to his credit Barry has accrued more than 120 papers, abstracts and reports and built a research school of enviable reputation. His personal contribution to the science of colour vision and to visual ergonomics has been considerable and is still ongoing. It is not by chance that at this juncture at least 13 of his graduate students have gone on to achieve professorial status in schools of optometry or related sciences throughout the world.

So much has happened during Barry's tenure that it is difficult to mark the highlights but I will attempt to continue in some sort of loose chronological order.

With the premature demise of the Faculty of Applied Science, a Department of Optometry was established within the Faculty of Science and this rendered the college somewhat redundant as an under-

graduate teaching resource. Council decided that the college should be retained and Cole proceeded with its regeneration as a scholarly graduate facility separate from association politics and yet complementary to both the association and the university department. This was a unique development for optometry. The clinic, a vital part of the college, has been developed from one of modest proportions to become a significant resource in Victoria's public health system. In addition to its teaching and research functions it services among others a large proportion of the State's low-income population. The overseeing by the college of the state-instigated Victorian Eyecare Service has expanded this function into regional areas.

The ambitious concept of the National Vision Research Institute was the next challenge for Barry Cole. As a multidisciplinary institution founded and largely funded at least in the early stages by optometrists, and having a simple charter to further research into vision, it represented another world first. In addition to orchestrating its foundation along with particular help from David Cockburn, Jean Colledge, Lions International and the State Government, he assumed the responsibility of being its acting director for the first difficult five years. Together with the Department of Ophthalmology, he went on to develop the highly-regarded low vision clinic of the Association for the Blind (now known as Vision Australia Foundation). This has since been replicated in several regions throughout Victoria, thereby answering a community need of growing magnitude.

Increased student and staffing levels and greater research activity, combined with a much expanded clinic and burgeoning NVRI, demanded increase space. Over a 20-year period he masterminded an ambitious and sometimes scary redevelopment and expansion program for the Cardigan Street complex. A remarkable transformation has been achieved and I have been assured that there is no truth in the rumour that Barry is the only staff member who can venture more than 50 paces from his office and find his way back on the same day.

Well, these are the bare bones of this man's contributions. Putting flesh on to these bones has been a lifetime's work. He would not claim that he was solely responsible for all these projects but some were his own brainchild and none could have developed in the manner they have without his personal direction and creative zeal.

At another time Barry Cole has been described as a man of many parts. As well as being a scientist, an educator, a communicator and a builder, he has a love of fine art, fine wine and fine food, a man of natural grace with more than a touch of old-world charm. Somehow he has always found time to express love for his family and loyalty to his friends. For this and for so much of what he has achieved, he would readily share credit with his wife Jean. A true Renaissance gentleman indeed. Chaim Weizmann once said that 'miracles sometimes occur but one has to work terribly hard for them'. Barry Cole most certainly has worked very hard.

We thank you, Barry, for your contribution to optometry, to society and to so many of our lives. May your well deserved retirement be long, happy and rewarding.