

## OBITUARY

## Geoffrey Herbert Henry DSc MAppSc BSc LOSc

Noted optometrist and eminent neuroscientist

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Geoff Henry died peacefully at the end of a long and productive life. If one can measure worthiness by the sum of life's contributions and the respect and love engendered on the journey, then by all counts Geoff was a very worthy man.

He came from a happy scholarly home; his father was a school principal and sometime Deputy State Director of Secondary Education. Geoff's early education was in rural Victoria and later at Melbourne Boys High School, The University of Melbourne and the Australian College of Optometry, gaining honours along the way. His bent was towards the biological sciences but also he excelled in geology and chemistry. Throughout these years, he read widely in diverse subjects such as Greek mythology, philosophy, Australian and European history and later the creative arts. He was proud of his Anglo-Australian heritage and his links with rural Australia, often speaking of one of his forebears, who was reputedly Melbourne's first commercial brewer. Geoff was a gregarious and hospitable man, happy with a glass of red and lively conversation. Age was no barrier but pretentiousness was not tolerated.

Geoff completed his undergraduate studies in 1951 and immediately established a private optometric practice in a



suburb of Melbourne, Victoria. Shortly after graduation he became a teaching clinician, part-time lecturer, physiology demonstrator and member of the Council of the Australian College of Optometry. In 1955, he was appointed Chairman of the College Council and held that position for 12 years.

This was a period of extraordinary development for Victorian optometric education and not the least due to Geoff Henry. It was a time when the first full-time lectureship was established, land was acquired for the college and a new building erected; the college was affiliated with the University and the optometry course of the college was incorporated within the

newly formed Faculty of Applied Science of The University of Melbourne. Having achieved university status for optometry in Victoria, the next step was to develop a research school. Henry, along with Barry Cole and me, commenced several co-operative research projects on colour vision and through opportunistic circumstance concentrated on tritan colour vision defects and the recognition of coloured road signal lights by people with abnormal colour vision. This led to three significant papers published in international journals and earned senior degrees for all three of us but perhaps more importantly the discipline and spirit of enquiry required in the process convinced Geoff that his future lay in full-time research.

After 15 years of private practice and now with a wife and four young children, he applied for and was awarded a Churchill Fellowship in the very first round of those scholarships. This enabled him to work as a Research Fellow on primate colour vision with Russell Devalois at Indiana University and to spend several valuable months with William Rushton at Cambridge University. On returning to Australia in 1968, he joined Dr Peter Bishop at the John Curtin School of Medical Research, Australian National University, an ideal environment in which to develop his career as a neuroscientist.

Over the ensuing 30 years, he was principally concerned with furthering our understanding of the visual cortex using the striate cortex of the cat as a model. In

particular, he explored cell specificity relating to orientation and receptive field. His studies also extended to the afferent neural connections and the input of the lateral geniculate body. This was pure research that has laid the foundations for numerous subsequent studies. It also earned him a DSc degree from The University of Melbourne and a world reputation for his contributions to the understanding of the visual cortex.

In all, he had published in the course of his career more than 70 papers, contributed chapters to several books and presented more than 50 invited international lectures.

He had supervised and mentored many PhD students and the respect and affection that he engendered has been evident in recent messages of condolence.

In 1982, Geoff was appointed as Faculty Chairman of the John Curtin School of Medical Research Australian National University and nine years later Executive Director of the Centre for Visual Science. Optometry recognised his achievements by granting him the coveted Glen Fry Award of the American Academy of Optometry for his contributions to visual science. In 1968, he was elected to Honorary Life Membership of the Victorian (now Australian) College of Optometry. On his retirement, he was elected as an Honorary Fellow of the National Vision Research Institute of Australia. Just as optometry took pride in Geoff's career path, he also took pride in the academic achievements of so many of the graduates from the college, an institution that will forever be indebted to him for his contribution in the critical developmental years.

Geoff was not only a scientist but also a man with a surprisingly catholic range of interests. Always he was ready to discuss Greek mythology, Australian natural history, politics, literature, music or art. Nevertheless, he was perhaps happiest when enjoying at his holiday retreat the tranquillity of the New South Wales south coast. In his retirement, he not only pursued art as a pastime but contributed scholarly and entertaining articles to the *Canberra Times* on international and Australian artists, often linking their art with

aspects of visual processing. It is hoped that in due course these will be published as an entity. In 2001, he organised a festschrift entitled 'The Art of Seeing and the Seeing of Art' sponsored by the Centre for Visual Science and the Research School of Biological Science in the Australian National University. Scientists, artists and scholars came from many parts of the world to participate.

Geoff had many friends and interests but his family came first. His pride in his four children and his grandchildren was often evident. To quote from e-mail correspondence after his death from Professor Sarah Dunlop, President of the Australian Neuroscience Society, 'Geoff was a remarkable scientist and a true gentleman in the fullest sense of the word, who contributed enormously at multiple levels. Many of us will remember Geoff vividly for his sheer depth and breadth of knowledge as well as for his unwavering support and kindness to one and all. A gentle giant indeed.'