

PROFILE

Professor Brian Layland OAM

Fifty years of commitment to optometry

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This year marks 50 years since Brian Layland received his optometry diploma. In that time, he has had an enormous impact on Australian optometry and his passion and expertise can be seen behind many of the major advances the profession has made.

His major accomplishments include a significant role in the acceptance of optometric services into Medicare and Veterans' Affairs; the establishment and development of VisionCare NSW, the Optometric Vision Research Foundation and other organisations dedicated to eye care research, education and service delivery; and the thousands of satisfied patients he has seen in 50 years of practice.

Most recently, he has joined the International Centre for Eyecare Education to turn his talents to improving Aboriginal eye care, with the successful establishment of more than 60 eye care clinics within Aboriginal Medical Services in New South Wales.

In 1979, he was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for services to the profession of optometry and in the same year, he was made an Honorary Life Member of the Australian Optometrical Association, NSW Division. In 1992, the World Council of Optometry named him International Optometrist of the year.

The story behind his numerous appoint-



Brian Layland
OAM ASTC BSc(OptSc)

ments and awards is one of dedication, friendship and warmth, of many meetings, long battles and the art of making contacts and building relationships. It would be unfair to say that Brian loves an argument; rather he loves winning an argument. His debating skills are legendary but always softened by his sense of humour. Quick with a witticism or one of his corny jokes, Brian Layland's patience, talent in conversation and above all his commitment are the attributes that have changed the course of Australian optometry.

Early life

Brian was born in 1930 in the suburb of Balmain, a few kilometres west of the centre of Sydney. When he was seven, his family moved to Ingleburn, which was then a village on the southern outskirts of Sydney, where he grew up with his brother and two sisters. Ingleburn changed dramatically in 1939; the Second World War began in September of that year and the biggest army camp in Australia was built there. After that, the lives of school children in Ingleburn were different from those of children in most other places. It was difficult to concentrate when troops and a brass band marched past the school, accompanied by tanks and gun carriers, or when mock battles brought soldiers running through the classroom, throwing flour bombs.

Brian sold newspapers in the army camp from the age of nine. He did this for three years, acquiring a vocabulary that he quickly learned was not to be used at home. It was also his first experience running a small business. Ten children were each given 100 papers and would march up and down the huts making sales. With tips it was a big business and a great help to the family's finances—at 35 shillings a week Brian made more than his father who had joined the army and was paid two shillings a day. During this time, Brian made friends with many of the soldiers, beginning his lifelong ability and interest in talking to people from all walks of life.

At the army barracks, Brian made his first contact with an Aboriginal person. In the 2/10th battalion from South Australia

were two Aboriginal soldiers whom Brian came to know well, or as well as you can when you are nine or 10 years old. One of them came to dinner at the family home once a week. Before he was shipped overseas, he gave Brian a nulla nulla, carved with the soldier's name and service number. Brian still has it at home. The two corresponded for years, with letters arriving covered in dirt from Tobruk or Bengazi.

Career beginnings

Brian did not set the world on fire with his early educational achievements. He left school at Intermediate level (Year 9) to become an apprentice optical mechanic with optometrist Alex Hale at 137 Castlereagh Street, Sydney, later transferring to the optometric firm of Gibb and Beeman. He decided that he needed to further his schooling and went to night school to do his Leaving Certificate. He is still not sure how he got through it but he did and this enabled him to enter the optometry course at the Sydney Technical College.

On graduation in 1953, Brian went into practice on the road. He was employed as an optometrist in a travelling consulting room in a truck. There was a slight problem because he did not know how to drive and did not have a licence but he assured a police officer that he knew how to drive—or at least had seen people driving—and got his licence. He had a quick lesson driving around the block before taking off for Portland on the other side of the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney. This was the first stop in one of two regular routes, one to the north-west and the other through Canberra to the south coast.

In 1954, Brian started his own practice in Liverpool in the western outskirts of Sydney, where he stayed for 45 years. The practice grew and prospered, despite Brian's many absences working for optometry, with seven optometrists working there at one time. Brian was a dedicated and talented optometrist and had a very caring attitude to his patients. He always enjoyed clinical practice and talking to people.

His life was by no means confined to his

practice and advancement of his profession. For many years, he has been active in numerous local organisations, including Apex, Rotary, Meals on Wheels, Liverpool TAFE and Liverpool Royal Blind Society. He was awarded the Liverpool Chamber of Commerce Business Pioneer of the year in 2002 for his contribution to the Liverpool community.

The health insurance battle

The health insurance battle began in 1953 when the conservative Liberal Government under Prime Minister RG Menzies introduced its health insurance program that provided medical insurance benefits for patients of ophthalmologists but not of optometrists. This was devastating for optometry: it reduced the proportion of people needing eye care who saw optometrists from 80 per cent to 40 per cent.

Brian was passionate about this issue and as a very active member of the Australian Optometrical Association he was closely involved in the negotiations to have optometric services included in the government subsidised health insurance scheme. He was a councillor of the Australian Optometrical Association NSW Division from 1955, state president of the association from 1971 to 1972, national vice president from 1971 to 1975 and national president from 1976 to 1979. He also served as a member and the chair of the Optometrical Services Committee of Inquiry. He was active both in meeting rooms and in public, giving many television and radio interviews to promote the cause.

These negotiations lasted for 22 years, from 1953 until 1975. Brian Layland was there throughout the long process of campaigning, lobbying, meetings and trips to Canberra. He met with a succession of five health ministers, one of whom said 'I know what you fellows are saying is right but we are not going to change, the medical influence is too great. I wish you well.'

While in opposition, the Australian Labor Party had said that when it got into office it would change the program to pay benefits for optometric consultations, so Brian and the association worked hard to get Labor into power. In 1972, the Labor

Party was elected to government with Gough Whitlam as Prime Minister, ending 23 years of Liberal Party government.

Just prior to the change in government, the first winds of change for optometrists began to blow when they were granted the right to refer their patients directly to ophthalmologists, rather than through the patients' general medical practitioners. Referral through the patient's GP had been necessary for the patient to qualify for government medical benefits. This change was the first government recognition of the primary health care role of optometrists.

More was to come. The incoming Labor government reaffirmed its intentions to include optometry in health insurance benefits and the health insurance program was moved to the Social Security Ministry, with Bill Hayden as Minister.

Another series of meetings began, with optometry and ophthalmology making claim and counterclaim to the government. At a meeting of the Health and Welfare Committee, the ophthalmologists, who included Drs Fred Hollows, Jim Fair and Theo Kaldoulis, were asked by the Minister for Health, Dr Doug Everingham, whether they minded if general practitioners referred patients to optometrists for spectacle prescriptions. The ophthalmologists said they had no objection. However, Brian had a secret weapon in his bag. This was a letter that had been circulated by the Royal Australian College of Ophthalmologists and the Australian Medical Association (AMA), which expressed the hope that all medical practitioners would realise that it was always in the best interests of their patients for them to be sent to an ophthalmologist and not to an optometrist, even if all they needed was a prescription for spectacles. The chairman of the meeting, Bill Hayden, challenged the ophthalmologists with the letter and, receiving no satisfactory answer, closed the meeting.

It was clear that optometry would be supported but the work was not finished. The planning of the program took many more weeks of meetings, discussions and examination of all the likely issues; for example, the government had given no

consideration to contact lenses. Moreover, there were some concessions optometry had to make—each optometrist had to enter into a participating agreement and agree not to charge more than the negotiated fees.

Brian was there through the whole process. When the legislation was listed to go to parliament, Brian, with other senior members of the AOA national executive council Bruce Besley and Arthur Ley, and Damien Smith, took turns to be in parliament for about three weeks, to ensure that on the day the legislation was brought on, someone was there to answer questions.

The legislation was passed on 1 July 1975. Optometry became the first and only non-medical profession to be incorporated in the national health insurance scheme.

Other battles

Brian fought for optometry's rights and the improvement of eye care services in many other spheres. He has always enjoyed the process of politicking, getting people on side, coming up with better plans and speaking out in committees—or as he puts it, sticking his bib in.

As well as his roles within the Australian Optometrical Association, Brian served on the NSW Optometrists Registration Board from 1972 to 1988 and the Optical Dispensers Board from 1976 to 1982. He campaigned for the veterans' right to see optometrists under the veterans' health insurance program. Prior to this, veterans' access to eye care benefits was very restrictive. They had to see an ophthalmologist and obtain their glasses from designated contractors who offered only a limited range of frames. Brian argued for the rights of optometrists to look after veterans and for a better range of spectacles and the campaign was ultimately successful.

Since 1998, he has devoted a great deal of effort to reducing the risk of blindness due to diabetes. He has some self-interest in this, as Brian is one of the 1.5 million people with diabetes in Australia. He is the chair of the National Diabetes Committee of Optometrists Association Australia and an active member of the Australian Dia-

betes Society Diabetic Retinopathy and Visual Impairment Committee. He is also a member of the NSW Department of Health Diabetic Retinopathy Steering Committee and the NSW Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (Diabetes Steering Committee). Previously, all the diabetes literature released by the commonwealth and state health departments and Diabetes Australia directed that diabetic patients should have their eyes examined every two years by ophthalmologists. Brian's advocacy caused the recommendations to be changed to include optometrists.

International Layland

Brian also became involved in the international scene. He was appointed Australia's delegate to the International Optometric and Optical League (IOOL) in 1975, where he served for 13 years. The IOOL was founded in 1927 and is now known as the World Council of Optometry. It is dedicated to the enhancement and development of eye and vision care worldwide. Brian was chair of the league's finance committee from 1973 until 1984 and a member of its executive council from 1976 until 1984. He was the league's vice president from 1978 to 1979 and was made vice president Emeritus of the IOOL in 1990.

All of this involved a lot of travel—Brian estimates that he has travelled to at least 62 countries on IOOL business. He went to some interesting places and met some interesting people but Brian did not enjoy flying. His knuckles were usually white from gripping the armrest throughout a trip but flying from Sydney to Melbourne or Canberra, sometimes twice or three times a week in pursuit of national professional politics, and flying internationally for IOOL accustomed him to flying and he no longer tears the armrests from the seat.

Drugs and optometrists

Brian was also involved in optometrists obtaining the right to use diagnostic drugs. The state registration acts, originally enacted in the early years of the 20th Century, prohibited optometrists from using drugs that would 'paralyse the powers of accommodation'. Some optometrists felt

this wording permitted them to use anaesthetics for tonometry and contact lens practice and mydriatics to dilate the pupil, even though the latter had the side-effect of paralysing accommodation. However, not all optometrists felt sufficiently confident to push the law so close to its limits. The prohibition stood in the way of providing patients with best possible care.

In the late 1950s, a review of the NSW Optician's Act was announced. The optometry board proposed that optometrists be permitted to use drugs for diagnostic purposes. To everyone's surprise, the bill included provision for optometrists to use prescribed drugs for prescribed purposes, provided they had completed a suitable course of instruction.

This caused a furore with the ophthalmologists but Billy Sheehan, the NSW Minister for Health at the time, went to bat for the optometrists. Little did the ophthalmologists know that this support stemmed from the minister knowing George Bell, the then chairman of the NSW Optometrists Registration Board, from Sheehan's time on the hustings. In those days of no television, it was customary for politicians to make regular 'soap box' speeches. George Bell's family lived in Billy Sheehan's electorate and Bell's father was a supporter of Sheehan. Bell would accompany his father on Friday nights when Sheehan spoke in the street and he carried the soapbox for Sheehan. When Sheehan met with Bell as chairman of the board, the friendship was renewed.

The minister was approached by the British Medical Association and the Ophthalmological Society of Australia, which said that countless people would go blind if optometrists were given the right to use diagnostic drugs. Sheehan asked for evidence, as English optometrists had been using drugs since about 1912 without any problems. An all-party select committee was established to look at the issue. The committee met only once and it heard only one witness, Sir Phillip Baxter, the Vice-Chancellor of the NSW University of Technology. He affirmed that the university would be able to conduct an appropriate course of instruction, so the legislation was passed.

This was not the end of the battle. The university decided that an ophthalmologist was needed to teach part of the course. Australian ophthalmologists blackballed the course and the university was forced to look overseas for a lecturer. In 1963, they appointed a lecturer from the UK but when he disembarked from the ship at Melbourne docks, he was met by an ophthalmology delegation that told him he would not be provided with hospital facilities and would not be accepted as part of the Australian ophthalmological profession. He turned tail and returned to the UK.

The next person the university appointed was Dr Fred Hollows^a but he refused to teach the university's drugs course even though this was the understanding on which his appointment was made. This caused an impasse until 1970, when the minister changed the wording of the legislation so that an optometrist with a drugs certificate could teach the course. However, as the course had never been run, there was no-one with the certificate. This difficulty was circumvented by determining that practitioners who were registered in England were automatically qualified to be awarded the university's drugs certificate. Brien Holden^b was qualified in the UK and was awarded the first certificate and Brian Layland received the second. Together they ran the UNSW drugs course.

Brian later learned from the former Under Secretary of the Minister for Health, Harry Jagg, why the government agreed to change the legislation to allow a qualified

optometrist to teach the drugs course. The ophthalmologists had objected; the minister had met with them and with the AMA, which said it had been asked by the ophthalmologists to express disapproval of the proposal. Off the record, the AMA told the minister 'We think it's a lot of bullshit' and the legislation went forward.

University of New South Wales

Brian has had a long association with the University of New South Wales. He studied at its precursor, the New South Wales University of Technology, to convert his optometry diploma to a degree,^c graduating with a BSc (Optometry) in 1958.

Brian Layland has been a member of the advisory committee of the UNSW School of Optometry and Vision Science since 1957 and a visiting lecturer since 1971.

He became good friends with a new lecturer, Brien Holden, and they have worked together on many projects. In 1972, Brian Layland, Brien Holden and George Bell conceived the idea of the Optometric Vision Research Foundation (OVRF). During visits to England, Brian had seen collection tins for the London Refraction Hospital and was impressed by the amount of money they were able to raise. The blue and white OVRF tins were born and found their way into many Australian optometric practices. Over the years, the membership of the OVRF grew and the foundation contributed funds to a range of research, educational and public health projects in Australia and overseas. Brian is honorary secretary of the foundation.

Other organisations such as the Cornea and Contact Lens Research Unit (CCLRU), the Institute for Eye Research (IER), the Cooperative Research Centre for Eye Research and Technology (CERCERT) and VisionCare NSW, were es-

tablished and prospered with Brian Layland's invaluable help. In 1992, Brian was appointed a visiting professor of the University through CRCERT and is a member of the CRCERT Board.

NSW spectacles

The NSW Spectacles Scheme, which provides vision correction aids at no cost to eligible pensioners and low-income earners in NSW, began around 1946. The initial scheme was cumbersome. The state government would call for tenders for the supply of the spectacles, an optometrist or optical dispenser would be awarded the contract and would endeavour, with varying degrees of success, to enlist agents so that the service was available across the state. Patient access to the benefits was also complicated. Patients had to establish their eligibility with the Department of Community Services, then get a prescription and return it to the department, which would issue an order for the spectacles, which the patient had to take to an agent.

Brian was one of the campaigners against this overly complicated scheme and with Brien Holden decided to bid for the contract through CRCERT. They were successful. A new enterprise, VisionCare NSW, began management of the NSW Spectacle Scheme in September 1992. It has the support of four optical laboratories and more than 700 agents throughout the state. Over the past 10 years, it has supplied more than 836,000 spectacles to those in need. Brian Layland was VisionCare NSW's chief architect and continues to be involved as secretary of its board.

Retirement and Aboriginal eye care

Brian sold his practice at Liverpool in 1995 and gave up his weekly visits to the local nursing home, having been warned by his wife that one day they might keep him there.

In November 1999, at an early meeting in Melbourne of Vision 2020: The Right to Sight, Australia,^d attended by Brian Layland and Brien Holden, it was claimed that there were about 120,000 people in Australia who were either blind or severely

a. Professor Fred Hollows was a UK ophthalmologist who later became famous for his sight-saving programs in Australian Aboriginal communities and developing countries. The Fred Hollows Foundation was established to continue his work.

b. Brien Holden is an Australian optometrist who qualified to practise in the UK when in London to study for his PhD degree. He was appointed lecturer in the School of Optometry at the University of NSW in 1970 and went on to become Professor and Director of the Cornea and Contact Lens Research Unit and the Cooperative Research Centre for Eye Research and Technology at the University. (See McMonnies CW. Profile of Brien Holden. *Clin Exp Optom* 2001; 84: 366-371.)

c. The optometry course had been at the Sydney Technical College and was a night-time course leading to a diploma. In 1949 the Sydney Technical College became the NSW University of Technology. From 1953, optometrists holding the optometry diploma were offered a conversion course leading to a degree in optometry. (See Cole BL. Profile of William George Kett. *Clin Exp Optom* 2000; 83: 283-287.)

visually impaired as a result of uncorrected refractive error. It was also said that a high percentage of these people were members of the Aboriginal community.

On behalf of the International Centre for Eyecare Education (ICEE), Brian Holden undertook to tackle the problem in NSW. On the way back in the plane, he said to Brian: 'You ought to be able to do that'.

Brian Layland arranged a meeting with representatives of the Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (OATSIH), NSW, which is a division of the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aging.

At the meeting, he was told that Aboriginal people had poor access to eye care because they were reluctant to visit mainstream hospitals and private optometrists or ophthalmologists. There was a need for eye care services to be provided in Aborigine-controlled health centres. The Commonwealth government had agreed to finance equipment for seven eye clinics to be established within NSW Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS) facilities at Wagga Wagga, Walgett, Wellington, Kempsey, Narooma (subsequently located at Bega), Bourke and Broken Hill. The Commonwealth also agreed to provide ongoing funding for the employment of an eye health co-ordinator at each of these locations.

Brian proposed that ICEE establish the clinics with optometric services to provide initial care and to make referrals to ophthalmological services when appropriate. He first needed the support of the peak Aboriginal health body in NSW, the Abo-

iginal Health and Medical Research Council (AHMRC), which he obtained. ICEE and AHMRC signed a Memorandum of Understanding that would result in ICEE providing optometric services for the seven initial locations and other locations as agreed. All consultations would be bulk-billed and all patients would be offered optical appliances through the NSW Government Spectacle Scheme. AHMRC undertook to encourage its member AMS boards to co-operate with ICEE by promoting the program and providing space, staff, transport and other assistance. Wherever possible, ICEE would utilise the services of a local optometrist in providing eye care services.

Brian set about negotiating with the AMS groups and optometrists throughout the state to set up workable arrangements for each region. Brian also approached the Royal Flying Doctor Service and arranged flights for ICEE optometrists and other staff to selected AMS locations.

The first ICEE team flight was made to Walgett in December 1999 and the first clinic was established at Redfern AMS in July 2000. ICEE now has a presence at more than 60 locations around NSW, based on effective collaborations built between ICEE, AHMRC, AMS, CRCERT and local optometrists.

The reaction of the Aboriginal communities to the ICEE program has been excellent. The AHMRC was impressed by the speed with which the program was established, driven by Brian's unflinching enthusiasm. To date, about 8,000 patients have been seen in the NSW program and many of the patients attending the clinics have never been seen by an eye care practitioner.

Brian plays a very active role in the program, travelling to many regions and personally delivering eye care services. They are long days with an early morning flight and a long line of patients but Brian enjoys the contact with patients and the chance to do something for people in need. From the days of not liking flying, now he notices only if the flight is bumpy enough to interfere with reading or writing because then he has 'wasted a few hours'.

Family

With so much travel in the cause of optometry, Brian was often away from his family and his practice but Brian's wife has happily 'put up with him' for many years.

Brian met Jeanette at a local dance in the Progress Hall and they were married in 1956. As an optometrist, Brian had a special wedding day gift for his wife—a pair of contact lenses. Jeanette is short-sighted and did not want to wear glasses on the big day. Jeanette became involved in optometry, setting up the Optometric Book Company, which imported textbooks from England. The company provided all the optometry books for UNSW and other students, until it was sold to the Australian Optometrical Association.

Brian and Jeanette have three children: a daughter Beverley, who is an optometrist in Hobart, and sons Ian, who works for Rodenstock, and Peter, who is an electrician.

Full circle

Brian's optometry career is coming full circle: he is taking to the road again. There are many small remote Aboriginal communities that can be served best by a mobile eye care team. Brian has started driving to these communities regularly in the ICEE station wagon. The first trip in April 2003 did not go as planned. Brian set out for Balranald and Ivanhoe in outback Western NSW. The car broke down, stranding him in the outback for several days, but Brian is undaunted and is hoping to trade the car for a four-wheel drive to cope with the outback roads.

He has come a long way from the consulting truck he drove in 1954 and he may know more about driving now but Brian is still doing what he loves—helping patients and talking to new people.

Brian Layland has enriched optometry like few others. He is much loved by his colleagues and friends and remains a powerful force in the Australian profession for the improvement of eye care in this country and around the world.

d. Vision 2020: The Right to Sight is a global initiative designed to eliminate avoidable blindness by the year 2020, established by an alliance of the World Health Organisation, the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness and the Partnership Committee of the International Non-Government Development Organisations. Vision 2020: The Right to Sight (Australia) aims to organise the implementation of the Vision 2020 goals throughout Australia. More than 50 Australian organisations involved in vision and eye care research, education and community work have come together to work in three areas: the Australian community, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and global eye care.