

Professor Josef Lederer. Some Notes on His Career

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ABSTRACT Professor Josef Lederer had outstanding contributions to education, politics and philosophy in his profession of optometry. The article covers the history of the establishment of his University and his School, the courses offered including higher degrees, and research both in the School and in associated research units and a research foundation.

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Professor Josef Lederer, Master of Science has stepped down from the Chair of Optometry at the University of New South Wales.

At such a time it is tempting to say that an era has ended. For once it is true.

In assessing his place in optometric education, let us first look at the origins of his School. We must begin with that now almost forgotten man William George Kett. He was a Victorian, one of two brothers both of whom were important to our profession. Intended for medicine, W. G. Kett was kept from this by the early death of his father. Attracted to optometry he studied in Melbourne under M. Henri Heims. Then he went to Sydney to work for Francis Foy of Mark Foy's and then to London where he qualified FSMC, FIOO. He studied further in Germany and France.

Thus he became exceptionally well qualified compared with most of his contemporaries in Australia. He had a thirst for learning and a desire to teach, which he did in the New South Wales Institute of Optometrists' Diploma (FIO) course from 1915 when he returned to Sydney.

W. G. Kett was a founder of the AOA in 1918.² He was one of those who worked for and achieved legisla-

tion in New South Wales in 1930. He was a member of the first Board which was set up under the Act. He created a four-year part-time course at the Sydney Technical College where he was a member of the Optometry Advisory Committee. Thus he established the first recognisable formal statutory qualification for optometrists in New South Wales.

Then occurred the event which was to make an enormous difference to optometric education in Australia in that it led to the acceptance of optometry into the Calendar of a University.

The New South Wales Government in 1937 set up a Royal Commission to report on Technical Education. Those who could be loosely described as the enemies of optometry told the Royal Commission that the course of training in optometry need be of but a limited and restricted character. Kett was able to give the contrary view in evidence of great authority.

Indeed his performance was so impressive that the Government appointed him to be a member of the State Technical Education Committee which it set up to give effect to the findings of the Royal Commission. Soon he was President of the Committee.³

Kett took the view in this Committee and with the Government that the Sydney Technical College should become a New South Wales University of Technology. When the Act of Foundation was passed to set up the university, he had solved the problem created when the University of Sydney declined to take in optometry. He had created a university for his optometry course.

The University began in 1948 and he became a founder member of its Council. Departments moved to the campus at Kensington as their new homes were built. Optometry, though a foundation course, did not move until 1971, but it did not suffer any loss being in its old stately home at Ultimo until then.

On 13 April 1957 the University conferred upon William George Kett the honorary high and rare Degree of Doctor of Science. This acknowledged what

he had done to give effect to an idea unique in Australia and very rare anywhere in the world: of a University of Technology.

To this University in 1950 Josef Lederer B.Sc., (Sydney) then aged 29 years, was appointed Senior Lecturer and Head of the Department of Optometry having been given the same appointments earlier in the same year at the Sydney Technical College. This was the year, momentous in our history when optometry was accepted into the University, the first in the British Commonwealth.

Though Kett was around to give much support, as he could from his lofty position on the University Council for another 12 years until his death in 1972, from 1950 on the story of the advance of the Department and School of Optometry is the story of Lederer, its Head.

He was born in Vienna in 1921. In 1939, just eight-year old, he came to Australia escaping, with his family from the coming holocaust. His father was a lawyer.

He matriculated to the University of Sydney in 1941 and commenced the Optometry Diploma course at the Sydney Technical College in that year. He completed the course in 1944 with Honours and the College Medal. He went into practice for two years and was part time lecturer until he was appointed full time staff lecturer in 1947, the first in Australia (the first of his firsts!).⁴

Westheimer had qualified a year before him and had gone on to the University of Sydney to become Bachelor of Science. So did Lederer, graduating B.Sc. in 1949.

It was the next year that he and his Department were transferred to the University. He was the sole full-time staff, space and equipment were inadequate, funds were almost negligible. There was a long way to go to the present School in a splendid building with a staff of a professor, an associate professor, 3 senior lecturers, 4 lecturers, 14 other staff and 26 visiting lecturers, with programmes of research and candidates for higher degrees, and its associated research institute, the Optometric Vision Research Foundation (OVRF).

The first degree course began in 1952 as an extension course to convert diplomates of the Sydney Technical College. These were the first degrees in optometry in any university in the British Commonwealth.⁵

In 1958, the University extended its scope to include the Humanities and such Faculties as Medicine and its name was changed to the University of New South Wales. If there is any stigma in being in a university of technology, this was removed.

Lloyd Hewett was Editor of the Australian Journal of Optometry for much of Lederer's 31 years as an academic, and was closely associated with him in other ways. He has said that Lederer's gifts as an organiser and administrator of superior talent were used in an active campaign to upgrade his Department and he had an impact not only within the University of New South Wales but with the profession throughout Australia.⁴

Two notable early diplomates were G. Amigo 1952 and B. Layland 1953. George Amigo went on to become the first optometrist Doctor of Philosophy (1962) in a university in Australia or anywhere in the British Commonwealth. Brian Layland (B.Sc. Optom. 1958) is an important figure in Australian and international optometry.

In 1953, Lederer was working towards his Masters degree. As part of this work he developed his first series of Lederer lenses which were single lens magnifiers with good field properties and much cheaper than compound systems as an aid for the partially sighted.

By 1954 the promotion of these lenses had made his name a household word and had reflected strongly and advantageously on optometry as a profession with authority in low vision.⁴

Starting from his early days as a full-time academic, his ability as a clear compelling lecturer put him in great demand as a speaker in continuing education to optometrists in every State. He revitalised attitudes to practice and sowed in many minds the seed of awareness of the necessity for continuous upgrading of clinical knowledge.⁴

He was modest in his demands for financial reward. The Treasurer of my own Division reported to his Council: "So long as Joe goes home with the same quid that he came with, he will be satisfied."

Because of his position of authority in the vision of the partially sighted, he travelled to every state lecturing on the care of patients with subnormal vision. Special clinics were set up. The metropolitan and regional press and radio carried to every corner of Australia stories of the rehabilitation of partially blind people. Lederer's contribution to the clinical management of subnormal vision was immense and not only with the use of his own lenses. He deserves better recognition for this.⁴ In his retirement he will continue low vision research in the Royal Blind Society in Sydney.

In 1955 he attacked, as others have since, the methods used to detect vision problems in school children. He urged and taught optometrists to be involved in the special visual problems of children. He set up a Reading Deficiency Clinic, the first in Australia whereby optometrists were better able to come to grips with paediatric learning difficulties.⁴ From this has grown in recent years, Dr Amigo's Children's Vision Research Unit in the OVRF institute associated with his School.⁶

In 1956 he was awarded the degree of Master of Science.

Then he directed his energies to visual factors involved in road safety, preaching to the profession and involving them in public demonstrations and drivers' vision screenings. He formulated a series of tests and designed a set of charts and ancillary instrumentation. His personal efforts did much to define optometry's role as an authoritative body on matters of vision in safety and public health.⁴

In 1956 he introduced an improved series of Lederer lenses which provided further stimulus to optometry's role in subnormal vision care and the right of optometrists to counsel patients with intractable vision loss.⁴

Vision and visual safety in industry he approached with the same enthusiasm and in much the same way as vision in road safety and in the partially sighted. He introduced industrial optometry into his undergraduate course, taught it at congresses of continuing education and preached it through the media who had come to know him well as a source of well-informed newsworthy comment.⁴

In 1956 Mr Lederer was promoted to Associate Professor in his University. Again he was the first optometrist to hold this rank in the British Commonwealth of Nations. It is roughly equivalent to Reader in older universities.

In 1960 part-time degree courses were offered.⁷

Professor Lederer has been active politically within the AOA nationally and in his State Division. He concentrated much of his energy in 1956 and 1963 toward obtaining changes to the Optometrists' Registration Act in his state. Both from his advice and the influence he possessed he had a significant part in achieving a wider definition of optometric scope of practice and the right of access to diagnostic drugs.

He was a Council member of his Division from 1946 to 1969 and has been honoured with Life Membership of his Division for most exceptional services. He has been a member of his State Board of Optometric Legislation since 1955 and a member and chairman of the Optical Dispensers' Licensing Board since 1963.

The last diplomate passed in 1965 (Angela McCarthy: now M.Sc.). The last part-time student completed the course in 1967. In all, 230 qualified in this way.⁷

Lederer was far-seeing and original in many of his ideas. One which was almost wholly and instantly rejected by his brethren was his concept of "Ophthalmist". In this he proposed that optometry should consider the concept that some optometrists be allowed to voluntarily restrict their scope of practice, not work as primary consultants, but instead to work in ophthalmologist's rooms and under their direction. I have often wondered since if we should not have considered this more fully. Since then ophthalmologists have proliferated the use of ophthoptists to perform optometry in their practices and some are known to employ up to six "girls" who have no formal training at all doing ten minute "refractions" all day. This reflects well upon the service we give, but surely it is poor for the patients.

His academic interests in the 1970s included: vision and road safety; standards of sunglasses, eye safety in industry; spectacle lens design involving new concepts of isogonal lenses to correct aniseikonia; and in 1977 his attention focussed for a while on transfocal lenses, with extraordinary properties, to correct presbyopia.⁴

He also produced a logarithmic, percentage-graded

test chart, a forerunner in some ways of the recent Bailey-Lovie chart.

In his publications prior to 1960, Josef Lederer showed his breadth of interest and his industry. He published 40 papers on thirty different research subjects. See my Waterworth paper for a summary⁶ and the Australian Directory of Optometrists for more detail in the entry under his name.⁸

His output settled to a more normal average of one paper a year over the next 14 years. This reflected his increasing commitment to teaching and to organising, directing and supervising the researches of others.

It is worthwhile for anyone to read the Annual Report of his School to the Visiting Committee. This shows the enormous increase in scope since Josef Lederer began as a one-man Department 31 years ago.

In December 1968, the Faculty of Science offered through the Optometry Department, a double Degree of Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Optometry. Further, it offered a formal postgraduate course leading to the degree of Master of Optometry. This provided advanced professional training in clinical and theoretical aspects of optometry and for elective specialisation in special fields of optometry. The compulsory part was called Advanced Clinical Optometry and the elective fields were: Contact Lenses, Occupational Optometry and Orthoptics. The elective fields were made up of different combinations of three out of six elective subjects: Advanced Physiological Optics; Binocular Vision and Space Perception; Advanced Orthoptic Theory and Practice; Occupational Optometry; Clinical Photography; Advanced Contact Lens Theory and Practice.⁹

In the March 1969 issue of our Journal the Editor commented that these Master's programmes offered world class qualifications to graduates who are aware of the necessity of obtaining specialist qualifications in a world of increasing professional standards. The Editor was confident that those who completed the Masters Degree would be Masters of their profession in practice as well as name.¹⁰

Optometry has even now scarcely advanced into the field of specialisation and it seems to me that these electives were excellent and this is the way to go.

When the Vice Chancellor and Principal of the University opened the new Optometry Department within the university precincts on 10 February 1971, he remarked that these Masters' Degrees were the first of their kind.¹¹ Taken with the other "firsts" I have mentioned, he said this constant stream of "firsts" leave no contradiction to the claim that the Department and its staff had pioneered and established optometry as an academic discipline. He continued: "The Department has established an enviable reputation in theoretical and clinical research... in the general field of space perception, especially in aniseikonia and one can add to this the current interests in flicker fusion, electro-oculography and the visual characteristics of pre-school children... new vistas... that have attracted world wide attention."

In this article I have relied heavily on J. Lloyd Hewett in an Editorial in our Journal of October 1976. I cannot do better than to end by quoting a statement he made in the previous month's Journal:

"Josef Lederer in his career from student to Professor has made outstanding contributions educationally, philosophically and not least politically to the development of Australian optometry."¹²

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