

OBITUARY

Emeritus Professor Josef Lederer
1921–2007

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Professor Josef Lederer died on 4 June 2007 at the age of 85. He was the Foundation Professor of Optometry at the University of New South Wales and the first Professor of Optometry in the countries of the British Commonwealth. He steered the development of optometric education in New South Wales from a four-year part-time diploma course at the Sydney Technical College to a full-time degree course at the University of New South Wales, leading the way for the other two Australian optometry schools.

Joe Lederer was born in Vienna in 1921. His father was a lawyer and the plan was that Lederer would follow in his father's footsteps. The rise of Adolf Hitler's Third Reich in the 1930s put paid to that plan. When Germany annexed Austria in 1938, the Lederer family decided to immigrate to Australia. Lederer's father was from a Jewish family, originally from Bohemia, which was good enough reason to flee the country. The family left Austria in a hurry for Australia in July 1938 but without completing immigration formalities. They reached Sydney in January 1939 after a stay of several months in Haifa. Joe Lederer, now aged 17, had not completed his schooling and spoke only a smattering of English but, after a little time doing odd jobs including pulling espresso coffee, he resumed his schooling and passed his matriculation examinations in 1940.

He decided to study optometry at the Sydney Technical College (STC) because it



was a part-time course, which would give him time to earn some money. His father wanted him to study accountancy but this did not appeal to Lederer; he saw accountancy as a profession in which he would 'earn a little money counting other people's big money'.¹

He completed his optometry diploma in 1944 with great distinction. He was awarded the Sydney Technical College Medal and was appointed as a part-time lecturer in the optometry course in the year after he completed the course. He then studied for a Science degree, majoring in physiology at the

University of Sydney, which he completed in 1947, while working in private practice and teaching part-time at the STC.

The Second World War ended in 1945 and enrolments into the optometry course increased. As a consequence, a full-time lecturer position was created by the STC, to which Lederer was appointed in 1947. Lederer was always a strategic thinker: he knew that the STC would develop to offer degree courses and his goal was that optometry should be one of those degree courses. He revised and strengthened the course and persuaded the STC to extend it to five years of part-time study.

The New South Wales University of Technology was established in 1949 and optometry was one of the courses of the STC to be transferred to the new university and upgraded to degree standing, just as Lederer had planned. The New South Wales University of Technology was later named the University of New South Wales.

Josef Lederer continued as Head of the Department of Optometry in the new university until his retirement in 1981. For many years the department was within the School of Physics but Lederer eventually persuaded the university to establish a separate School of Optometry and a chair of optometry. This was a very significant step for the discipline of optometry. Lederer, already an Associate Professor, was appointed to the new chair in 1976 and became the first Professor of Optometry in Australia.

One of Josef Lederer's major contributions was to arouse our interest in low vision. In the 1950s and 1960s optometrists had little

to do with the rehabilitation of patients with impaired vision. Patients of optometrists with sick eyes were referred to ophthalmologists, never to be seen again. The blindness agencies in Australia did not have low vision clinics and did not make use of optometrists.

Lederer's research for his Masters degree included studies of the management of low vision and the design of spectacle magnifiers. He applied aberration theory to design high plus lenses with optimal control of aberrations to produce what became known and marketed as Lederer Lenses. The lens design was very clever and merited a paper published in the prestigious British journal *Nature*.² It may have been even more important that Lederer told us that an easy way to provide magnification to help those with low vision was to prescribe high plus lenses.

Lederer did more than that: he travelled the country in the mid 1950s, speaking to optometrists about what can be done for patients with low vision, from stenopaeic slit spectacles to high plus lenses, to other forms of magnifiers and appropriate lighting. He had developed a systematic approach to the management of low vision and was one of the first in the world to do so. Norman Bier in the UK did not publish his book on low vision until 1960 and Eleanor Faye in the USA did not become associated with the Lighthouse for the Blind until 1956.

I attended Josef Lederer's seminar on low vision in Melbourne when I was a final year student in 1955 and listened to his methodical discourse, as he opened our eyes to what was then a new field of endeavour for optometrists. He achieved considerable public recognition for his Lederer Lens and was the first Australian optometrist to work in a low vision clinic within an agency for the blind. He provided low vision services for the Royal Society for the Blind and the Concord Hospital and also established a low vision clinic at the University of New South Wales. He continued to work in low vision clinics after his retirement from the university in 1981.

He was somewhat dour in manner and forcibly methodical in his lectures but his former students hold him in highest regard for his knowledge and intellect, even though bemused by his habit of chain smoking throughout his lectures. He was an athletic player of tennis, an accomplished pianist and

lover of opera. He will be remembered as a man who shaped the development of optometric education in Australia and who introduced us to the practice of low vision.

REFERENCES

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