

PROFILE

## Damien P Smith AM

Optometry's leader

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On 26 June 2002, Damien P Smith was installed as President of the World Council of Optometry, which is the international organisation that acts as advocate on behalf of nearly 200,000 optometrists around the world, regardless of their training or background, and their associations.<sup>1</sup>

He has been described as one of the most well-known and respected optometrists in Australia and the world.<sup>2</sup> How has this come about?

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF A LEADER OR WAS HE EVER SO?

Damien Smith graduated as an optometrist from The University of Melbourne in 1967 and continued his education to gain a Master of Science in Optometry (1970) and a Doctor of Philosophy (1974) as a result of his studies on acquired dyschromatopsia and inherited optic atrophy.

Even as an undergraduate student he showed leadership, becoming Secretary and then President of the Australian Optometrical Students Society. Later, he was a member of the Executive Committee of The University of Melbourne Research Students Association.

Fortunately, while a graduate student, he discovered that he required less sleep than the average person. This enabled him to become involved in undergraduate



**Damien P Smith AM** BAppSc MScOptom  
PhD LOsc FAAO FVCO

teaching and to complete a one-year part-time course in Teaching Methods and still find time to court and marry Helen in 1968.

In 1972 before the completion of his thesis and on the recommendation of Bruce Besley,<sup>3</sup> Damien accepted a part-time position as Director of Professional Services at the Australian Optometrical Association (now Optometrists Association Australia). It was a timely arrival, as in 1973 the National Executive Director of the AOA vacated his position and Damien was

appointed to the vacant post.<sup>3</sup> This proved to be an appropriate and appropriately-timed change-over.<sup>3</sup> When Damien replaced the previous executive director, the official historian of the AOA, Charles Wright,<sup>4</sup> stated that 'Smith was not only incomparably more able but he was a brilliant political strategist and aggressive in asserting the worth of his profession and its practitioners'.

### MEDICARE

These abilities came to the fore during the health insurance debate.

Damien brought with him a whole range of skills and expertise that proved to be invaluable in the lead-up to and during the implementation of the Whitlam government's Medibank, the universal health insurance program.<sup>3</sup> This was one of the most important periods in the development of optometry in Australia.<sup>3</sup> For the first time, health insurance benefits for consultations with optometrists became available to every man, woman and child in Australia.<sup>3</sup>

At that time, National Council was blessed with a number of astute amateur politicians who knew their way around the Parliament and the bureaucracy but not one had the writing skills, the discipline and the thoughtful approach to resolving problems that Damien soon demonstrated.<sup>3</sup>

He was a member of all of the working groups and most of the delegations to government members and bureaucrats and

was the primary author—and frequently the sole author—of most of the submissions.<sup>5</sup> He was able to think and write in a manner that appealed to bureaucrats and to propose overall policy that appealed to politicians.<sup>6</sup> He had learned the methods and the value of research and used these in his preparation for meetings. He researched the green *Bulletins* for political information, especially politicians' speeches about optometry, to quote from them and to hold the politicians to what they had said or promised—and forgotten.<sup>5</sup>

Not surprisingly, these submissions provoked strong and aggressive, indeed at times irrational, reactions from organised ophthalmology.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, Wright<sup>5</sup> claims that Damien Smith was straightforward, calling the ophthalmologists' plans concerning the health system clumsy, ill-considered and full of bias and untruth of political propaganda. Perhaps it is a weakness but Damien seems to work best when he is fighting an enemy, particularly political ophthalmology. At one stage, he 'wrote a thesis (on the meaning of a visual acuity of 6/30), accurate and suitable for a Minister to quote in the house, being calculated to addle the lay brain'.<sup>5</sup>

Damien was able as a verbal negotiator who performed well under attack and was able to sense the common ground.<sup>5</sup> There is little doubt that Damien contributed much to optometry's entry into Medicare. Working 60 to 70 hours a week, he was largely responsible for our success<sup>6</sup> and without Damien, there may have been no entry at all.<sup>3</sup>

Medicare was not the only success during his period as Executive Director of the AOA. Outstanding among them was the inclusion of clinical optometric services in the Veteran's Affairs Medical Services in 1977. Again, Damien was the principal strategist, advocate and negotiator.

Damien was involved in academic issues. With Queensland Institute of Technology (QIT) staff member Dr Leon Garner, later head of optometry at the University of Auckland, he harassed the authorities at QIT (now the Queensland University of Technology) into upgrading the optom-

etry course from a diploma to a degree, providing a platform from which Professor Ken Bowman and later Professor Leo Carney built a world-class optometry program.

On occasions, Damien showed his initiative in other ways, as reported by Brian Layland,<sup>3</sup> a former National President of the AOA. When National Executive Council of the AOA met, it was customary for all members to land at Tullamarine airport between 5 pm and 7 pm, to have a 'cup of coffee' and when all had arrived, to be driven to their accommodation by Bruce Besley (also a former National President of the AOA) in his car and Damien in the AOA's Layland P76. On one occasion when Bruce was not available, Damien fitted all eight people and their luggage into the P76. As there was room for only seven in the car, the luggage in the boot was rearranged and Charles Wright AM travelled in the boot.

Other initiatives taken by Damien during his term as AOA Executive Director are still benefiting members. These include the purchase of the valuable buildings in Drummond Street, the Wright library, professional indemnity insurance, optometry workforce studies and *Australian Optometry* newspaper.

Damien continued in the role of Executive Director of the AOA until 1980, when he went into private practice. Even then he continued his involvement, often behind the scenes, and contributed to the end of discrimination against optometrists by the School Medical Service, the Victorian Eyecare Scheme and the successful struggle for the use of therapeutic drugs by optometrists in his home state of Victoria.

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### IFAPAO

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At a breakfast meeting in Toronto in 1977, while Damien was AOA Executive Director, it was discovered that Damien and the Philippines were entertaining a similar vision for a regional organisation of optometrists. In Manila in July 1978, the three participants—Claro Cinco and Antonio Joson, both from the Philippines, and Damien Smith—founded the International Federation of Asian and Pacific

Associations of Optometry (IFAPAO).<sup>7</sup> Damien assumed the position of Secretary-General of IFAPAO, now known as the Asia Pacific Council of Optometry (APCO) and held that position for 17 years. Dr Cinco became its Foundation President.

At their meeting in Manila, they envisaged 'that IFAPAO shall grow slowly but steadily from modest beginnings'.<sup>8</sup> This proved to be an accurate prediction. Under their guidance, IFAPAO grew from the original nine countries in 1978 to 18 countries and 26 associations.<sup>7</sup>

Initially, the idea was greeted with much pessimism and discouragement. 'The idea won't work' and 'it's bound to fail' were some of the comments from leaders in the area. However, IFAPAO succeeded and became the world's leading regional organisation of optometry.<sup>7</sup> The success was anchored on Damien's personal philosophy, which made it possible to unite together the practitioners in optometry despite the diverse educational background, culture, language, race and creed.<sup>7</sup> This was assisted by his encyclopaedic knowledge of optometry in the Asia-Pacific region, by his political acumen and by his (usually) tactful handling of competing (quarrelsome) optometric groups.<sup>9</sup>

Through his leadership and example, Damien 'crystallised the goals and aspirations of optometrists in this region and united over 100,000 practitioners of diverse culture and background, serving the eye care needs of three billion people. He has inspired member countries to upgrade educational programs, enact statutes and enhance ethical values to elevate the standard of the profession in the Asia and Pacific region'.<sup>10</sup>

A special feature of IFAPAO has been the academically, culturally and socially successful meetings (Asian Pacific Optometric Congresses) held in many exotic places throughout the Asian Pacific region. Damien personally arranged all of the details of the conferences, including the accommodation and social events and even the menus. Initially, he also organised the academic program, which later became the prime responsibility of Professor Marion Edwards of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

The success of IFAPAO inspired what is now the organisational plantilla (blue-print) of the World Council of Optometry, where the WCO serves as the umbrella organisation supported by the five regional groups worldwide.<sup>7</sup>

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## MAN OF LETTERS

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One of Damien's strongest features is his excellent control of language and his ability to write with flare, although he can also be pedantic and forceful. As an undergraduate student, he was editor of *Spectacle*, the annual publication of the Australian student body. While employed by the AOA, he regularly wrote a column that often ran to several pages in the *Australian Journal of Optometry* (now *Clinical and Experimental Optometry*), reporting important optometric news items from around Australia and overseas.

According to Wright,<sup>5</sup> during the battle for optometry's entry into Medicare 'Damien Smith operated at a higher level of honour, the level of the written word, where there never must be any dishonourable manipulation of the truth; where all was true and proven true'. Wright<sup>11</sup> claimed that Damien was either dazzlingly brilliant or more incredibly painstaking than the opposition. I am sure that there was a little of both of these qualities.

There is no doubt that Damien is a wordsman but Layland<sup>3</sup> prefers 'word-SMITH', a term that may have been coined by the AOA National Council to accurately describe him. During the Medicare debate, submissions were prepared, almost on a daily basis. Without exception, submissions and other documents were first class and well received. Even today, they make interesting reading.<sup>3</sup>

In 1992, Damien founded, was Managing Editor of and a major contributor to *Vision Asia-Pacific*, the official journal of IFAPAO. He was Joint Editor of the journal of the Australian Public Health Association and the Australian and New Zealand Society for Epidemiology and Research in Community Health (*APHA/ANZSERCH Quarterly*) from 1976 to 1978 and an Associate Editor and on several occasions Acting Editor of the *Australian Journal of*

*Optometry* between 1975 and 1984.

Damien Smith initiated the inclusion of Asian languages in the IOOL glossary of optometric terms to add to the European languages already prepared.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, Damien has written about 32 scientific papers, with some in prestigious journals including *Vision Research* and *Investigative Ophthalmology*, 42 technical reports and submissions and hundreds of reports, commentaries and editorials.

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## THE WORLD STAGE

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As a result of his activities with the AOA and IFAPAO, Damien had become well-known throughout the optometric world. In 1992, he was invited by the International Optometric and Optical League (later the WCO) to be a member of a 'Think Tank' of optometric leaders. This group formulated the WCO Concept of Optometry and Damien contributed much to this definition.<sup>7</sup>

The Think Tank also proposed the formation of a task force, which consisted of five members, again including Damien, to look at the future of the WCO. This group proposed radical changes to the organisation of optometry worldwide, especially to the structure and function of the supreme governing body and to the financing of the development and promotion of optometric eye care services.<sup>13</sup>

In 1997, Damien joined the Governing Board of the WCO and became chairman of its Committee on Standards. Having been voted President-Elect in 2000, his presidency has followed.

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## COMMUNITY

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It might be expected that with such an active international agenda and a very successful optometric practice, Damien would have his hands and his diary full. However, when Damien sees something that he believes needs doing, he is always active. He decides what is required and sets out to achieve it.<sup>14</sup>

Damien's interest in the delivery of health care developed before and during his time as Executive Director of the AOA but extended beyond optometry. He was

a foundation member of the Victorian Division of the Australian Public Health Association (APHA), was on its Executive Committee and later Victorian President, Federal Councillor and Federal Secretary. Soon after, he was elected national Vice-President of the Australian and New Zealand Society for Epidemiology and Research in Community Health. He was voted to office by biomedical professors of community health, epidemiologists, health service planners and biostatisticians, whose respect he had earned through his knowledge of and contributions to public health.

From 1984 to 1995, Damien was the Ministerial appointment to the Committee of Management of the Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital. He participated in many committees and was chairman of the Hospital Association Accreditation Committee and the Total Quality Service Committee. Under his chairmanship, RVEEH became the first teaching hospital in Australia to gain five-year accreditation. His previous political encounters with ophthalmologists would have contributed to some very interesting meetings. Without doubt, Damien is a chronic committeeman but, unlike some, he believes in contributing and making things happen. He is prepared to ask the hard questions that others will not ask.

Damien has been a member of the Council of the Victorian College of Optometry since 1974 and has participated in most of its boards and committees. 'He has served on virtually every Australian organisation in the field and is a highly regarded member of the International Advisory Council to China's National Optometry Research Center, an affiliate of the New England College of Optometry.'<sup>2</sup>

On the local council scene, he has been involved with committees for beautification and environmental services.

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## ENTREPRENEUR

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In 1985, together with five colleagues—Ian Breadon, Peter Dwyer, Anthony Gibson, John Jennings and Peter Milhinch, four of whom were former AOA state presidents—he formed National Ophthalmic

Services Pty Ltd, a vehicle for entry into industrial eye care. After some initial success, it became apparent that the venture was not worthwhile and in 1986, the company was used to launch an optometric buying and support group. Its purpose is to promote efficient financial management techniques for independent optometrists so that ethical practice can be pursued as a personal objective without perceived adverse economic consequences. More than 50 independent practices have benefited.

In 1996, laser surgery was gaining acceptance as a feasible technique for the correction of refractive errors, optometrists were becoming involved in limited comanagement of patients with some eye diseases and legislation for the use of therapeutic drugs by optometrists was thought to be imminent. Optometry's role in this new technology needed protection and promotion. This was an ideal time for Damien, John Jennings and Lionel Kowal, a Melbourne ophthalmologist, to form 20/20 Laser Vision, a Limited Liability Partnership of more than 70 optometrists and ophthalmologists. This established a referral network, a treatment facility and a comanagement model recognising the clinical skills of optometrists.

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## ACCOLADES

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With such an active career and a high profile on the Australian and international scenes, it is not surprising that Damien has been honoured with many awards. The distinguished service awards and the citations are too numerous to list but there are some that need mention.

In 1995, Damien was named the International Optometrist of the Year by the IOOL. In the same year, he was honoured by the Government of Australia by the award of Membership of the Order of Australia (AM) 'for services to optometry and to the promotion of eye care in the Asia-Pacific region'.

Damien was awarded an honorary Doctor of Ocular Science from the New England College of Optometry in Boston in 1996 and locally, he received the inaugural Ivor J Lewis Medal by the Australian

Optometrical Association (Victorian Division) in 1986. This award is given to a young optometrist who by his or her actions and example has made an outstanding contribution to the progress of the profession.

In 1996, Damien received a unique honour. He is the first non-US citizen to be elected to the US National Academy of Practice. He was inducted into membership as a Distinguished Practitioner, the highest category of academic membership. The US National Academy of Practice is an advisory body to the US Congress and the Executive branch of the US government. Its role is to promote excellence in the practice of the health care professions so as to benefit the citizens of the US and to provide guidance on health care policy to the US government. Because of the stringent criteria for membership, fewer than 1,000 practitioners have been elected to the academy in its 15 years of existence and they come from all health disciplines, including dentistry, medicine, nursing, optometry, osteopathic medicine, podiatric medicine, psychology, social work and veterinary science.

On a personal level, Damien is renowned for his love and knowledge of good wine, particularly when enjoyed with good company. He is still married to Helen after 34 years and they have four children.

The special qualities and perhaps the main driving forces that have enabled Damien to achieve so much are his profound love<sup>7</sup> and deep devotion to optometry.<sup>15</sup> He also has a wonderful ability to crystallise an issue and see through complex issues.<sup>14</sup>

We can have great confidence that these qualities and his philosophy of leadership will work well with the WCO now that he has assumed the presidency of this world optometric organisation.<sup>7</sup>

To quote Brian Layland,<sup>3</sup> 'optometry need more Damiens'.

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