May 2010

Penrhyn Francis Thomas
1918 - 2010

Optometrist, Contact lens practitioner, innovator and entrepreneur. Aroused public interest in contact lenses and encouraged practitioner involvement

Penrhyn was born 25th October 1918. He graduated from Sydney Technical College 1939 with ASTC, obtained his B.Sc. from University of NSW in 1956 and awarded Fellowship of American Academy of Optometry in 1968. Penrhyn lectured and tutored in contact lens clinics at STC and later at UNSW between 1948 and 1972.

When Penrhyn was requested to report about contact lenses by the New South Wales Institute of Optometrists in 1946, he recommended education, professional relationships and the formation of a society of interested parties. At one of the joint meetings of Australian Optometrical Association (AOA), Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS) in Adelaide in 1947, Penrhyn read the first paper on the subject of contact lenses for such a meeting. Following on that a group of optometrists initiated moves to form the Contact Lens Society, initially in 1947, but the momentum of the society being thwarted by distance and communication difficulties of the time, so that the Society was actually formed in 1962 with initiatives coming from Queensland members. Penrhyn was one of the NSW early members.

A newsreel made in 1948, now in archives, shows Penrhyn taking the impression, making the lens and fitting to patient’s eye. He gained publicity with the star of a Sydney stage show in 1952 when she could see her audience for the first time wearing Penrhyn prescribed corneal microlenses.
Penrhyn made Australia’s first plastic haptics in 1942 and the first corneal microlenses in 1952 along the Tuohy design which he developed further, ultimately patenting the Conoid lens design in 1962 with a spherical optic zone tangentially blended to a straight periphery in order to achieve a gradient of pressure resulting in less nerve stimulation. The optic zone was usually fenestrated.

Corneal Lens Corporation Pty Ltd was registered in 1949 and by 1968 employed over thirty staff. Optometrists interested in the skills to prescribe Penrhyn’s lenses and witness the techniques Penrhyn had developed were invited to attend his practise for training courses. He also lectured widely and was published in Australia and New Zealand as well as travelling across Europe and North America to promote Conoids. Tom Willis provided the clinical services to patients in Penrhyn’s absence.

There was a necessity to charm patients with confidence and calmness for the initial insertion of a PMMA corneal microlens and Penrhyn, along with most of his contemporaries had those skills in abundance. Penrhyn was dapper, well presented in dress and style (the normal dress for fitting contact lenses was the white coat buttoned along the shoulder) along with the Pencil moustache and accompanied by the pipe when not with patients, the pipe often unlit.

Soft contact lenses from Otto Wichterle trickled through in the mid to late 60’s to those who went to great trouble to arrange a supply, but were highly variable to specifications. When Griffin Labs brought out the Naturalens made from Bionite. Penrhyn obtained a licensing agreement to produce the lenses from dry blanks supplied by Griffin. This association saw Penrhyn acquire an interest in Contactalens UK. In 1977 Corneal Lens Corporation produced one of the first toric soft contact lenses with Don Noack’s designs. Corneal Lens Corporation was acquired by Hydron and Penrhyn was appointed Hydron’s Research and Development Manager in 1977 and by 1978 the Hydron Zero 6 was born of Penrhyn’s work with Don.

Penrhyn had displayed an aptitude in technical skills and drawing. It would seem that those skills influenced the innovations in his career, and then in later life he took to oil painting, further developing upon pencil sketches from his earlier years.

Penrhyn retired in 1996 and the practise was continued then by Charles McMonnies and today by Gavin Boneham.

I had the honour of visiting Penrhyn in April at his home in Sydney to present him with Honorary Life Membership of the Cornea & Contact Lens Society of Australia. He was living independently with his wife, and the meeting brought fond memories of his clinic and lecturing days when I had most of my contact with Penrhyn. One document I had discovered in my collection and presented to Penrhyn, was the 1966 Contact Lens Society Congress (Registration $15.00) at the new roundhouse at Kensington where he presented three papers. One of course on Conoids, one on keratoconus and the other on moulding techniques for corneal microlenses.

Penrhyn will be remembered by his innovations, stimulating the public and practitioner’s awareness of contact lenses, initially as specialty products but in time becoming mainstream optometry.

Ian G. Sim
Immediate Past President
Cornea & Contact Lens Society of Australia