



Obituary

Brien Anthony Holden (1942–2015)

The sudden and unexpected disappearance from your life of someone that you had worked with and for over more than 41 years has some interesting sequelae. The realization descends quite quickly that never again will you see the big man, 'larger than life', sitting commandingly at his office desk. Never again will his distinctive voice be heard in the corridors of his domain, in meetings, at lecterns all over the world, or on the sports fields (his own career, his children's, the junior teams he coached, and the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Optometry sporting teams).

I first met Brien, or BAH as he was sometimes referred to, early in 1974. By that stage, despite only arriving in Sydney and joining the UNSW's Department of Optometry (as it was then known) as a lecturer in 1971 with his freshly-minted PhD (a thesis on orthokeratology from The City University, London), he was already well engaged in CL research. He had already conducted and supervised research projects within the Department as well as in collaboration with a biophysicist (Ray Simons) from the School of Physics located in an adjoining building. Furthermore, his first PhD candidate, Steve Zantos, was already on the starting block having just graduated in Optometry. From this it can be seen that he wasted no time in establishing himself and setting out on a path embracing CLs, a topic with little departmental research history but decades of influence by Penrhyn Thomas (1918–2010) and his proprietary rigid CL designs. One possible exception was the 1971 MSc thesis on corneal shape by Charles McMonnies, a career-long friend and colleague of BAH. Also of significance was his role in establishing a diagnostic drugs course for Australian optometrists at UNSW in 1971. His arrival with a UK diagnostic drugs licence enabled a course to be run and practitioner certification given, based on successful legislation in the state of NSW that had been passed in 1963 but which had laid dormant until 1971 because of the lack of a 'suitably-qualified'; academic (the medical profession refused to co-operate during that time). The NSW Board of Optometrical Registration deemed BAH to be a suitable academic, so he ran the first course and he was granted certificate #1 in 1972.

Tellingly, he had already established relationships with the majority of Australian CL manufacturers and collaborations focused quickly on the evolving and highly competitive early soft lenses (SCLs)—to some, he was known as Hydrophilic Holden at the time! That early work led to a landmark paper on toric SCLs [1]. From the beginning of his academic career he developed a rapport with optometry students, championed their causes (something he already had a history of [3]), and assisted them wherever possible. That was probably part of his character as there was ample evidence of his having the common touch which was later to resurface as his

humanitarian side in the late 1990s. Proof of his common touch was his routine inclusion of the building's janitor (Jack the cleaner) in all of his domain's social activities. A later manifestation was, arguably, the regular *Australia Party* events held in conjunction with the annual American Academy of Optometry meetings.

With another close friend, colleague, and Australian optical politician, Brian Layland, and a handful of others, BAH formed his first major fund-raising entity, the OVRF (the Optometric Vision Research Foundation) whose expressed aim was to raise funds for optometric research, especially CL research. Soon BAH turned the OVRF's attention to the acquisition of a departmental minicomputer, a move that did not meet with universal approval but BAH, Jack Alexander (another lecturer in the Department), and others who had overseas or local experience of the role minicomputers could play in research (PCs as we know them now did not exist at that time) joined the fray. An Interdata 7/16 minicomputer was purchased in late 1975 and was commissioned officially in March, 1976. That Interdata contributed into the early 1980s by which time it had been surpassed by newer, faster, smaller, and cheaper technologies.

1. The CCLRU

The first major research entity that crystallized out of BAH's CL research activities was the famous Cornea and Contact Lens Research Unit (CCLRU). Although its starting date has been assigned nominally to 1976, arguably its start date could be anywhere between 1973 and 1978. By the end of the 1970s, the CCLRU had several graduate students, employed researchers, ancillary staff and was involved in the supervision of numerous final year undergraduate CL research projects. The CCLRU was advanced significantly in the seminal year of 1980. In that year, George Mertz (USA, 1946–2002), John McNally (USA), and Des Fonn (South Africa) arrived to immerse themselves in CL research with BAH. Although Sydney only hosted the trio for one year, the fruits of their efforts resulted in significant papers, e.g. the Holden–Mertz criteria for minimum corneal oxygenation in daily and extended wear [2], arguably one of the most important CL physiology papers ever published and certainly one of the most cited. Des went on to establish his own CL research unit, the CCLR (Center for Contact Lens Research) based at the University of Waterloo, Canada. Christmas 1982 saw the CCLRU move to new, bigger premises on a secondary campus of UNSW, a location it retained until the move back to the main campus during Christmas 2000, where some remaining elements are still located. In 1985, the Institute for Eye Research (IER) was created and over the next few years, the CCLRU morphed into being a part of the IER. In 2010,

the IER itself was renamed the Brien Holden Vision Institute (BHVI), a name it bears to this day.

A successful application in 1990 (approved 1991) to set-up CRCERT (the Co-operative Research Centre for Eye Research and Technology) was a major step forward. It was part of a federal government-funded initiative to link academia with the real world and the Australian national science organization. A successful product from the two iterations of CRCERT was the first (1998) silicone hydrogel CL co-developed with, and marketed by, CIBA Vision (Atlanta, USA). With initial funding support from Essilor International, BAH set-up (also circa 1998) the International Centre for Eyecare Education (ICEE). Apart from training practitioners over much of the world in the art and science of progressive power spectacle lenses, part of its remit was to train local eye co-ordinators in the world less well served by eye care professionals. Those co-ordinators were trained to detect significant eye problems and supply appropriate ready-made spectacles to those needing vision correction.

With BAH's renewed humanitarian interests, his focus moved away from CLs. It should be noted that such interests were neither acquired suddenly nor were they 'new' to him [3]. To that end, in 2003, CRCERT made way for the more broadly-based Vision CRC that embodied humanitarian, educational, and research pursuits. In late 2012, ICEE changed its name to the Brien Holden Vision Institute: Public Health Division, part of the all-encompassing BHVI.

2. IACLE

The International Association of Contact Lens Educators (IACLE) was established circa 1978 as a Euro-centric group of CL educators seeking to enhance the standard of CL education. It was, and still is, a not-for-profit, apolitical organization that is now supported by most of the major international CL and CL care product companies. The major impetus to its modern incarnation came circa 1990 when Juan Carlos Aragón (JC), a charismatic optometrist working for Bausch & Lomb at the time, and BAH were discussing B&L's financial support of the then European organization. BAH noted how beneficial it would be if other industry members could be encouraged to join IACLE's education effort. To his credit, JC countered that if IACLE was really serious, it should be thinking about CL education globally, not just having a European focus. He postulated that if IACLE took such a global approach he would increase his company's funding and communicate with other industry members about the opportunity such a reinvigorated organization would represent for all of them. Most companies did join and BAH served as president of a revitalized IACLE until the late 1990s when Deborah Sweeney, the CEO of the Vision CRC, took the reins. When she left the Vision CRC (2009) to take up a senior position with the University of Western Sydney, the presidential baton was passed to Shehzad Naroo, a baton he still carries today.

3. Other endeavours and achievements

BAH's humanitarian interests also led him to create Optometry Giving Sight (OGS) internationally circa 2003, get involved in the WHO's Vision 2020 programme and Vision 2020 Australia, travel to the four corners of the globe to assess and help the vision impaired, assist the establishment of local optometry education initiatives, and assist the local political endeavours of organized optometry. He and close colleagues started (1992) VisionCare NSW, an organization to operate a NSW state government-funded, means-tested, spectacle supply programme for the less fortunate that operated until 2014. His commitment to the indigenous peoples of Australia was of long-standing and ongoing.

He was made a UNSW Scientia Professor in 2001 for outstanding research performance.

Along the way, he was awarded an Order of Australia Medal (OAM, 1997) by the Australian government for services to eye research and education, awarded a DSc by the UNSW, and has received seven honorary DSc degrees, probably more than anyone else in ophthalmic optics. He was the recipient of virtually every major research medal or award in optometry and/or CLs worldwide, the most recent being the prestigious American Academy of Optometry's Charles F. Prentice Award conferred at the Academy's 2014 annual meeting. A legacy that is likely to keep giving is the new *The Myopia Institute* that came into being on August 1, 2015.

4. Others that contributed to BAH's life

The 'old' adage that 'behind every great man stands a great woman' is certainly true in his case. Anyone who knows or has met his wife Yvonne will confirm the validity of the saying. Others worthy of special mention (apologies for any perceived omissions) and not mentioned in other contexts here include (in alphabetical order): Phil Anderton, Steve Dain, Charles Di Natale, Paul Erickson, Irving Fatt (1920–1996), Adrian Flanders, Rick Franz, Leon Garner, Ian Gorfin, J Lloyd Hewett (1923–1996), Arthur Ho, Donna La Hood, Dan O'Leary, Eric Papas, Rick and Steve Payor, David Pye, Nag Rao, Serge Resnikoff, Maki Shiobara (1962–2001), Earl Smith, Sylvie Sulaiman, Hugh Taylor, Rob Terry, Antti Vannas (1943–2006), Vaegan (1943–2008), and Mark Willcox.

5. A very personal perspective

BAH was my PhD supervisor and on more than one occasion my employer. Astutely, he had detected early the small wave that was to become the CL tsunami. I was fortunate enough to detect a young academic who was going places and threw my lot in with him, a decision I never regretted.

Of course BAH was not perfect, a very subjective assertion, and I am sure I speak for many when I admit that there were times that I would try to convince him, unsuccessfully, to change his mind or see something my way instead of his. Regardless, I doubt there is a single person that knew him who believes that the world is not better off for his having lived among us, as one of us. I last spoke to him in person at the most recent (2015) BCLA conference in Liverpool (UK).

May he rest in (well-earned) peace away from all the phones, smartphones, laptop computers, e-mails, staff, financial reports, aircraft, hotels, lectures, requests for help, and inquisitive audiences. There will only ever be one of him because the mould in which he was cast no longer exists and the creation of a replica mould is probably beyond us all, collectively.

References

- [1] B.A. Holden, *The principles and practice of correcting astigmatism with soft contact lenses*, *Aust. J. Optom.* 58 (8) (1975) 279–299.
- [2] B.A. Holden, G.W. Mertz, *Critical oxygen levels to avoid corneal edema for daily and extended wear contact lenses*, *Invest. Ophthalmol. Vis. Sci.* 25 (1984) 1161–1167.
- [3] C.W. McMonnies, *Profile: Professor Brien Holden OAM Scientia Professor, Clin. Exp. Optom.* 84 (6) (2001) 368–371. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1444-0938.2001.tb06609.x/pdf>.

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