

PROFILE

Kenneth W Bell

Honorary Secretary of Contact Lens Society of Australia 1969–2009

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Stephen Davis* BA(Hons) MA**Charles McMonnies†** MSc FAAO

* Institute for Eye Research, University of New South Wales

† School of Optometry and Vision Science, University of New South Wales, Australia

E-mail: s.davis@ier.org.au

Ken Bell has made an immense contribution to contact lens practice in Australia and internationally, particularly through his involvement in the Contact Lens Society of Australia (CLSA). He has been a driving force behind many of the society's initiatives to encourage education and research as well as foster international exchange. This profile pays tribute to Ken Bell but inevitably it also traces some aspects of the history of the CLSA during the time of his involvement as secretary—a period spanning 40 years.

The early years

Kenneth Bell's early education was undertaken in inner south-western Sydney, where he completed his Intermediate Certificate at Canterbury Boys High School. After leaving school, Ken's optometrist uncle, Jim Bell, arranged for him to be apprenticed as an optical mechanic in the practice of WG Kett, where he quickly developed an interest in becoming an optometrist. Kett was a prominent leader in Australian optometry at the time,¹ so working with him would have given young



Penrhyn Thomas (L) presents Ken Bell with the CLSA Distinguished Service Award, 1997

Ken a good insight into the future of optometry.

Entry to optometry courses at the time required a matriculation certificate and so Ken spent two years studying to fulfil this requirement. On matriculating in 1948, he enrolled in optometry at the Sydney

Technical College. Ken completed the course in 1952 and with a spirit of adventure, spent some time arranging practice visits to Lord Howe Island and Norfolk Island. A year later, he was offered a position in Singapore, which he accepted and spent the next 10 years in that region.



Ken Bell (R) presents Brien Holden with the Kenneth W Bell Medal, 1994



Ken Bell at the opening of the Rupert Myers Building, UNSW, 26 February 2000

Optometry practice in Southeast Asia

After settling in Singapore, Ken was soon conducting examinations in the Malay language. While on holidays back in Sydney in 1960, Ken was instructed in contact lens fitting by Sydney optometrist Tom Willis at Gibb & Beeman. Contact lens practice was still in its infancy: a few pioneering optometrists fitted scleral contact lenses in the 1930s to 1950s^{2,3} but the introduction of PMMA corneal lenses in the 1960s made contact lens practice more attractive and a greater number of practitioners were bold enough to enter the field. Ken was among the first of those who took up this new challenge.

He returned to Singapore in 1961, where he became the first optometrist in that country to fit corneal micro lenses. For the next 47 years, contact lenses were to be a major part of his life, particularly through his involvement with the CLSA.

In 1962, Ken opened a branch practice in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, where he met his future wife, Gay, who was working in a

nearby office. They were married in Singapore and in 1963 returned to Australia to settle in Sydney.

During his time in Malaysia, Ken provided eye care for the employees of a large mining company.

‘Gay and I travelled from Kuala Lumpur to Kuantan in the eastern State of Trengganu in the company train’, he recalled. ‘At the mining site, I met the nurse in charge of the company’s Casualty and First Aid station. I was provided with a room in the company’s Rest House, which contained accommodation rooms, a dining room and bar area. The room I used during the day had to be vacated before I started the contact lens fitting. After dinner, and where better to conduct an eye examination than in the bar area, I set to in the bar with my Burton Lamp, fluorescein and trial set; and with an attentive audience present—no doubt the Tiger beer and gins and tonic helped—proceeded to fit the first patients. So positive were the responses that three additional people were fitted, including the nurse, and I instructed them all on lens management.

We had such great fun in demonstrating insertion and removal techniques, especially with other people in the bar joining in with helpful advice. I trained the nurse to oversee lens handling and adaptation schedules and was pleased that out of the 10 lenses prescribed, only one required modification.’

During his stint in Singapore, Ken’s golf improved to a single figure handicap and he represented Singapore against Hong Kong in the Annual Inter-port Challenge. Ken modestly accepts his status as an international golfer.

Back in Sydney, Ken Bell became a partner in the company Whitehouse Optometrists and Opticians in Martin Place. After three years, he opened his own practice in Australia Square, which was later to house the registered office of the Contact Lens Society of Australia for many years.

Ken Bell and the Contact Lens Society of Australia

The CLSA was inaugurated in 1962, with its purpose being ‘to promote scientific

research in the field of contact lens work and to encourage the interchange of ideas and experience'. An earlier attempt had been made in 1948 to establish the CLSA but due to insufficient support the society languished.² It was to flourish in its reincarnation because the time was right and because of Ken Bell. In 1966, the society held its first Contact Lens Congress over five days at the University of New South Wales.⁴

In 1969, the then President of the CLSA, Charles McMonnies, asked Ken Bell to fill in temporarily as secretary while a replacement for the previous secretary was found. Ken proved to be so competent and committed that a replacement was not needed and he was duly formally elected to the position. The rest, as they say in the classics, is history. Ken Bell's involvement with the CLSA was characterised by an enthusiasm to enhance knowledge of contact lenses, develop standards of practice and promote further research and education through national and international exchanges.

A key point in the CLSA's history was the hosting of its first International Congress in Sydney in 1972, which featured one of the world's most prominent contact lens researchers, Dr Richard Hill from Ohio State University, as the key speaker. According to Ken Bell, the success of the congress stimulated great interest internationally, signalling the CLSA's 'coming of age', heralding a more active period, increased membership and the beginning of what has been an enormously successful triennial event.⁴ The next International Congress was held in 1975 with several leading international speakers, including Dr Richard Hill and Dr Montague Ruben from Moorfields Eye Hospital.

Still with his adventurous spirit and enthusiasm to promote the use of contact lenses and enhance knowledge, Ken Bell arranged a joint meeting of the CLSA with the Singapore Contact Lens Society. This meeting involved 42 CLSA members and was combined with a meeting of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS) in Perth.

In 1972, at the Annual General Meeting of the CLSA held in Sydney, the society resolved, on the motion of Dr Brien Holden, to provide a research award, which was supported with an agreed sum of \$500. The CLSA continues to support contact lens research, with grants of \$9,000 awarded in 1979 and \$60,000 in 1987, as well as \$10,000 in support for the Brien Holden Research Fellowship, an award that allows scholars from developing countries to study at the University of New South Wales. Since 1973, the society has provided nearly \$500,000 in research grants, testimony to Ken's ability to effectively promote and manage the society's activities.

During this phase, the CLSA played an important role in developing Australian Standards for contact lenses, involving Ken's attendance at meetings of the Australian Standards Association (now Standards Australia).

CLSA from 1976 to 2008

By 1976, the society's membership had grown to a healthy 236 as it continued to promote international exchanges. Ken Bell organised for 30 members to visit Hawaii and California where educational meetings were held with members of the Contact Lens section of the Hawaii Optometric Association in Honolulu, the Los Angeles County Optometric Society and contact lens practitioners from the American Academy of Optometry in San Francisco.

In 1978, the CLSA co-hosted the International Contact Lens Congress in Fiji in conjunction with the New Zealand Contact Lens Society. This was the CLSA's 3rd International Congress and papers were delivered by representatives from England, Canada, United States, Japan, Hong Kong and New Zealand as well as Australia.

Ken Bell's contributions and long service to the CLSA—18 years at that stage—were acknowledged with his admittance as an Honorary Life Member of the Society in 1987. At the 1990 AGM, the CLSA council established a triennial prize to be awarded to a distinguished academic or practitioner and which would carry an

honorarium and appropriate medal. The award was named the Kenneth W Bell Medal and the recipient is invited to present the opening address at the Society's International Contact Lens Congress. The initial medal was awarded to Dr Brien Holden. Ken Bell's contributions were further recognised in the naming of the Kenneth W Bell Contact Lens Laboratory at the Victorian College of Optometry in his honour in 1992, with Ken and his wife Gay proudly attending the official opening.

In 1996, the CLSA's membership stood at 682 and Ken suggested to the council that the society should begin to consider replacing him as secretary or at least appointing an assistant secretary within the next few years. Despite Ken having given some 30 years of service to the society, this was something of a surprise to the council but Ken must have had a change of heart or been otherwise persuaded that his continued services were essential and he continued in the role of secretary until very recently.

Contact Lens Society of Australia renamed and Ken Bell retires

The Contact Lens Society of Australia changed its name to the Cornea and Contact Lens Society of Australia at its 46th AGM in 2008. At the same meeting, Ken Bell stood down as secretary after 40 years of service.

In June 2000, Ken celebrated the introduction of the GST by closing his practice in Australia Square and retiring, but continued to act as a consultant one day a week. His wife Gay had passed away in February 2004. Ken reported that Gay was a great student, a great interior designer, an excellent golfer and a keen gardener but failed for many years in her attempts to find a replacement for him as secretary of the CLSA.

During his tenure with the CLSA, Ken was also actively involved in the Optometrists Association Australia, New South Wales Division, serving as the association's representative on the Optometrists Registration Board of NSW from 1973 to 1976 and 1979 to 1982, and as Chairman of the Registration Board from 1982 to 1988. In

addition to his work as a practitioner, Ken took up a position of contact lens clinic supervisor at the University of New South Wales in 1981, after a request from Brien Holden to help out for six months. Continuing something of a theme, he remained there until 1988.

Ken Bell's contributions to optometry, and in particular to the CLSA and contact lens practice, are very significant and have been recognised and honoured. In retirement, he can be well satisfied with his legacy, as he continues to play golf, bridge and pursue his interest in gardening.

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