

THE ORTHOPTIC ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA - 50 YEARS

(OAA Presidential Address - 1993)

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On 1st March 1944 a group of orthoptists held a meeting in Emmie Russell's rooms in Macquarie St, Sydney to discuss the foundation of an association for Australian orthoptists. Later that year the Articles of the emerging Orthoptic Association were signed by 14 orthoptists and we are honoured to have 3 of those orthoptists at this conference. On 26th September 1944 the Orthoptic Association of Australia was declared inaugurated.

Today, as we embark on our 50th Annual Scientific Meeting we will be entering our 50th year. In researching the history of the OAA I came across a commentary about our 21st year. It was written in 1964 by one of the founding members of the OAA, Mrs Diana Craig. I quote:

"The meeting for 1963 having been duly recorded as the 20th, plans went ahead for a (21st) birthday dinner on Saturday 4th April, 1964 and birthday cards were sent to foundation members. But our president, investigating past history in honour of the occasion, learnt that the first AGM was in fact not held until 1945. Celebrations being underway the embarrassing fact she reported was otherwise ignored and a good time was had by all.

But others may ask how an arithmetic anomaly could occur. It appears that a certain honorary secretary, having prepared the report of the 5th scientific meeting, described

the coincident AGM similarly as the 5th, in her minutes. Subsequent secretaries followed suit. The 1st scientific meeting having been held within one month of inauguration in 1944, this tidy but inaccurate adjustment added an apparent year to the age of the Association.

The committee had no intention to mislead. Is it right to let the matter rest? Ought we hold a second 21st birthday party in 1966? or may we ignore the formal inauguration date, and regard 1943, when the infant association began to stir, as its true year of birth?"

Holding our 50th birthday in 1993, our 49th year, is obviously in keeping with the fine traditions of the OAA. We have apparently always been ahead of our time.

On a more serious note, today we should honour and pay tribute to those distinguished orthoptists who met in Sydney in 1944. As previously stated 3 of those orthoptists, Mrs Retalic, Miss Lance and Miss Balfour are attending this conference. It was with great foresight, wisdom and courage that they founded our Association. Their initiative has proved valuable to all orthoptists in Australia in many ways.

The OAA has enabled us all to maintain close ties with our colleagues both interstate and overseas. This is witnessed by the fact that at this conference we have orthoptists from

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every state in Australia as well as colleagues from the United States, England and New Zealand.

Australia was the third country after the UK and the USA to establish a national association. The OAA was one of the seven founding member nations of the International Orthoptic Association (IOA) which began in 1967. In 1983 the OAA was honoured to have an Australian orthoptist, Shayne Brown, as the IOA chairman. Today the IOA has 15 national associations as members.

From humble beginnings in England in the 1920's when Dr Ernest Maddox trained his daughter Mary to use the amblyoscope in squint training as he found it too time consuming, the orthoptic profession has emerged. Since Miss Maddox the first orthoptist, was trained by her father, orthoptic education has progressed through clinical based training to the current university degree courses that are emerging throughout the world.

Currently the education of Australian orthoptists leads the world. We were the first country to have orthoptic courses in universities and it is perhaps fitting that the first Associate Professor of Orthoptics in the world was an Australian trained orthoptist, Elaine Cornell, at the University of Sydney.

The annual scientific meeting of the OAA enables us to share our questions, problems, research and knowledge and to pass our experience and skills on to others. Research has always been a priority amongst orthoptists in Australia. Every year since 1959 the OAA have published papers. Originally Transactions of the OAA were published following the annual conference then in 1966 the first Australian Orthoptic Journal was published. Today our journal is circulated to libraries throughout the world.

Together with keeping pace with the advances in the area of research there have been many changes in clinical procedures and practice since the days of the first orthoptic clinic at the Alfred Hospital in Melbourne in the 1930's. From their initial role in the management of squint and amblyopia orthop-

tists in Australia have ventured into fields as diverse as early childhood development, rehabilitation, eye care for the developmentally delayed and multi handicapped, low vision and blind patient management, rural and aboriginal eye health and eye care in underdeveloped countries. Despite this we have maintained our identity with a firm grip on our expertise in the management of strabismus and visual function.

There is no question that orthoptics in Australia has been through enormous development and evolution and we have achieved very high clinical and research standards. Unfortunately our progress has not been recognised outside the eye professions as we have not succeeded in enhancing the public awareness of orthoptics.

In 1993 it is clearly critical that we promote our profession to the public. We have made a start by conducting the nation wide study into the incidence of abnormal vision in 3 year old children, the results of which will be presented at this conference. This project involved a great deal of work for many of our members, however it represents only a very small fraction of the work that will have to be done to promote orthoptics.

To illustrate my point about public awareness I looked up 1944, the year of the OAA's 'birth', in the 1987 Australian Almanac³. Some of the prodigy of 1944 included the adventurer, Dick Smith, a sporting great, John Newcombe, the Prime Minister, the radio programme, Blue Hills and the first AFL football teams from Tasmania including one from Sandy Bay, the suburb which we are in today. The major omission from the Almanac was the birth of the OAA.

As we enter our second half century, medicine and patient expectations will continue to evolve. As a result the orthoptic profession will have to continue to adapt clinically and enter new areas of practice just as we have so successfully to date. We will also have to maintain our strong emphasis on research and on the education of both our members and our undergraduate students.

In addition, to attract the limited purse of

public funds needed for future research and development, we also have to increase our public profile. This must involve the active participation of each and every orthoptist.

However as we take on the challenges of the 21st century we must take time to pay tribute to the 14 pioneer orthoptists whose initiative has provided the orthoptists of 1993, the current custodians of the OAA, with a vehicle in which to take on the challenges of the future.

References

1. Mann D. Commentary on the 21st Birthday of the OAA. The OAA Transactions of the 21st Annual Scientific Meeting; 6:4, 1964.
2. Deane-Butcher D. The Toast to the Royal Australian College of Ophthalmologists. Ophthalmol. Exchange; 21(1):p, 1993.
3. Cameron A. Australian Almanac, 2nd Edt. Angus and Robertson Aust, 1986.

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