

OBITUARY

Sir Benjamin Keith Rank

14 January 1911 – 26 January 2002

Sir Benjamin Rank Kt cr 1972, CMG 1955, KStJ 1988, MB, MS, LRCP, FRCS (Eng.), Hon. FRCS (Edin.), FRACS, FACS (Hon), FRCPS (Hon) Canada, DSc (Hon) Punjabi.

Sir Benjamin Rank died peacefully on Australia Day, 2002 leaving a legacy of sheer artistry in plastic surgery, a field he pioneered in peace time Australia, building on the accomplishments of war time restorations.

Benny Rank was a man of vision and determination. He could see the broad canvas, but also had the capacity to take infinite pains to complete any project in which he became involved. He was a leader who could walk both with Kings and the common man.

He was a great believer in the advantages of team work in producing results. He was not threatened by excellence because he had supreme confidence in his own abilities and was happy to work with others to achieve his ambition.

He recognised, however, that to keep good people in the team required them to have their own space, or as he put it, “their own dung-hill”. He understood the dynamics of committees and institutions and was extremely successful and worked with organisations as diverse as the Australian Army, various hospitals, the Australian Medical Association, the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, St Johns Ambulance and Interplast Australia.

His qualities assured his success in whatever field he pursued. He had a great sense of history and documented everything. He kept detailed records of every patient he ever treated and this information is now at RACS.

For the thousands of people who benefited from his choice of medicine and plastic surgery as a career, it does not require much imagination to realise, with his qualities he would have been a highly successful architect, engineer, politician or business man. We should be grateful he addressed his talents to plastic surgery.

The family background was English and Benny remained an Anglophile all his life. He was born in Heidelberg, Melbourne and studied at Melbourne University and was a contemporary of Sir Edward (Weary) Dunlop. They were both residents at Ormond College in the 1930s and became firm friends.

He achieved the Master of Surgery degree in Melbourne in 1937 and then undertook post-graduate training in England, where he came under the influence of the father of British plastic surgery, Sir Harold Gillies. He was fascinated by the artistry and creativity of this emerging specialty.

Benny married his Tasmanian fiancée, Barbara Lyle Facey in London in 1938, with John Colbatch and Weary Dunlop in attendance.

With the outbreak of war, Benny enlisted in the Australian Army Medical Corps and was transferred to a field hospital in Egypt, where he undertook the repair of a plethora of war injuries.

He returned to Melbourne from the Middle East campaign and started work at the Military Hospital in Heidelberg, which by a remarkable twist of fate, was within a mile of his home.

After the war he established plastic surgery as a new specialty, despite the predictions of his senior colleagues that no such specialty existed and he would not be able to make a living.

He was appointed Honorary Plastic Surgeon at the Royal Melbourne Hospital in 1946 and established a team around him, which became the focus for the development of plastic surgery in Australia after the war.

He established a reputation of being somewhat of a martinet, but at the same time would unexpectedly arrive with flowers for his staff. He was extremely considerate of his patients and engendered great loyalty in his team.

He saw the advantages of the application of plastic surgery principles and techniques in the area of hand surgery. This led to the publication of his classic book, "The Surgery of Repair as Applied to Hand Injuries", co-authored with Alan Wakefield.

He established a reputation world-wide, as a rising star of plastic surgery and was actively courted by the British plastic surgery establishment to take up the newly created Chair of Plastic Surgery at Oxford.

His love of Australia, and Heidelberg in particular, resulted in him rejecting this opportunity and directing his energies to the development of plastic surgery in this part of the world.

He was a superb, artistic surgeon and during this time raised the specialty to a pinnacle of excellence in the medical community.

The 1950s was the era of the Colombo Plan involving aid to South East Asia. The Minister for External Affairs, Richard (later Lord) Casey accepted Benny's vision that aid under the Colombo Plan should include a plastic surgery component and Benny undertook an extended teaching programme to India.

Her Majesty the Queen recognised his services to medicine by awarding him the Commander of St Michael and St George in 1955.

He encouraged many of Australia's brightest young surgeons and gathered support for a 54 bed plastic surgery unit at the developing Preston and Northcote Community Hospital. The Victorian Plastic Surgery Unit was officially opened in 1965 and provided clinical training for plastic surgeons and nurses from Australia and overseas. The establishment of this unit required the agreement and co-operation of the Victorian State Government, six separate teaching hospitals and two universities. It was a tribute to Benny's organisational skills and his determination and diplomacy.

During this most productive period of his life he was appointed the Simms Commonwealth Professor of Surgery and travelled to Canada. He became the first non-British President of the British Association of Plastic Surgeons in 1965 and President of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons in 1966.

He played a major role in convincing the Victorian Government to introduce legislation to protect the community from injuries sustained in the work place and in motor vehicle accidents.

He was President of the 5th International Conference of Plastic Surgery, held in Melbourne in 1971 and in 1972 received a knighthood from her Majesty the Queen.

After his retirement from the Royal Melbourne Hospital in 1966, he continued as a consultant at the Cancer Institute Board and to the Victorian Plastic Surgery Unit, where he continued to direct the training of doctors and nurses in all aspects of clinical practice.

He never stopped building and advised his juniors that one of the first responsibilities when accepting leadership was to train a successor, so there was someone to build on the foundations.

He retired from active clinical practice in 1983 and pursued his interests in golf, gardening and painting, which allowed a further expression of his artistic talents. He painted very well and held a number of exhibitions for charity. The quality of his work was demonstrated by a complete sell-out of the paintings exhibited on each occasion.

In 1984 he was invited to accept the Presidency of Interplast Australia, which provided teams of Australian and New Zealand plastic surgeons, who today, conduct surgical programmes in our neighbouring countries correcting various congenital anomalies. Many escape lives of misery because of access to the specialist surgery now being delivered to hundreds each year through Interplast, by volunteer doctors and nurses, under the umbrella of Rotary, RACS and the AUSAID Programme of the Federal Government.

Benny Rank was the consummate team man, but excelled as captain. He was indeed fortunate to have the total commitment and support of his wife, Barbara, and his children, Helen, Andrew, Julie and Mary, and to them we must record our grateful thanks.

Benny had a long and productive life which touched and influenced the lives of countless people. His life can best be summed up in the words of his friend and colleague, Sir Edward Dunlop who wrote in a letter to Benny in 1977 words which are just as apposite today, *“You have been the complete surgeon and have filled out great offices with distinction. You now move on with gracious maturity to the role of senior statesman and greatly respected administrator, author, orator and counsellor”*.

Professor Donald Marshall
Victoria