

Bernard O'Brien
1924 – 1993



Bernard O'Brien died on 14th August 1993 at the age of 68. Prophetically born on Christmas Day, this event presaged a messianic career of effort and achievement. He was the second of five boys; one died at the age of nine but the others went on to outstanding careers in medicine, music and science. Bernard was a schoolboy athletic champion. At the University of Melbourne, typically opportunist and covetous of victory, he realised that he would be competing against the Australian sprint champion so he selected the relatively new sport of pole vaulting and thus gained his Blue in University athletics. This ability to achieve by seeing around the problem and pursuing it with relentless tenacity typified Bernard's whole career and earned him the nickname of "Champ"

He graduated in science and medicine in 1950 and became a Resident Medical Officer at St Vincent's Hospital for two years, followed by a period of training in general surgery. At the same time he had an association with the plastic surgery unit at the Royal Melbourne Hospital under Rank and Wakefield as Clinical Assistant. Overseas training in plastic surgery took him to Oxford as the Nuffield Clinical Assistant in Plastic Surgery in 1956, to Odstock, Salisbury

England with John Barron in 1957 and 1958 and to New York with Bill Littler as Hand Resident in 1959. Astutely mindful of the value of travel and of making contact he visited units in Europe including Russia before he returned to Melbourne. Already he had a clear vision of the great potential of microsurgery to reconstructive plastic surgery but opportunities at home were limited, and his bumptious and ambitious style unnerved hospital authorities and threatened some of his medical peers, cocooned in the darkness of their limited horizons. While lobbying for appointments he wasted no time in amassing a huge referral base for his private practice from country and sub-urban Victoria.

Bernard was a master of organisation and the efficient use of time, and to this end employed a chauffeur to enable him to work and dictate while travelling, a scrub nurse to organise and assist his operating and a research nurse as well as a secretary, all before he had the security of a fixed hospital appointment. Such was the conviction and confidence of his vision.

With an appointment at St Vincent's and the support of Professor of Surgery Dick Bennett, he gained access to a disused mortuary where he immediately set about animal research into microvascular repair techniques, histological evaluation of repair and injury, and the development of instrumentation, which led to some of the earliest publications in this field. Using his own money initially, he soon gained NH & MRC research funding and this support continued almost uninterrupted until his death.

Again showing his entrepreneurial skills he convinced prominent businessmen of his mission and thus the Microsurgery Foundation was formed in 1970, which led to the establishment of the Microsurgery Research Centre. He recruited a team which included surgical colleagues, scientists and scientific advisers. Soon research fellowships were established which attracted high quality trainees from around the world, many of whom would return to their own country and establish themselves as international leaders in the field of microsurgery. More than 100 Fellows completed a Fellowship of one year or longer from more than 20 different countries. Research output became prodigious leading to more than 300 publications, innumerable chapters and two books, the first of which was translated into many languages.

Bernard was appointed Hunterian Professor in 1974 and as his reputation grew he was awarded innumerable lectureships and visiting professorships. He presented his work at every available national and international forum and was one of the first to visit China in 1971 and witness first hand the extraordinary microsurgical endeavours that were in progress during the silent years of the cultural revolution. He gained the coveted Leriche Prize, the only Australian to do so, the Colles Medal, the Pirogov Medal from the National Society of Surgery of the Soviet Union, the first occasion that a foreign surgeon had received the award, the Dragon Award from the Chinese Society of Plastic Surgery and the Sir Hugh Devine Medal of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, the highest honour that the College can bestow.

Bernard's energies included committee participation in many surgical societies so as to promote the cause of microsurgery. He was President of the International Society of Reconstructive Microsurgery, the International Federation of Societies for Surgery of the Hand, the Australian Hand Surgery Society, President of the International Federation of Surgical Colleges and Vice President of the International Society of Surgery. He served for many years on the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons Council and became its Senior Vice President. He was made an Honorary Fellow of the American College of Surgeons and of at least four other international surgical colleges.

Civil honours were to come; he was made Companion of the Most Distinguished Order of St Michael and St George (CMG), Knight of Malta, and Honorary Citizen of Dublin, a Companion of the Order of Australia (AC) and in 1992 Victorian of the Year.

Bernard greatly enjoyed the company of others, a good drink and a joke. He was a great ractoneur and soon after the diagnosis of his terminal illness, when he was asked what he was going to do. he replied that he would adopt the motto of the London pickpockets society and "Just take things quietly". Needless to say he did not and was stung to even further endeavour particularly to expand and consolidate the funding of his beloved Research Centre in Melbourne.

Throughout his productive life Bernard was desperately busy but he always found the time to shower his family with love and to show his pride in their achievements.

Bernard will be remembered for his dogged tenacity, his ability to see the grand vision of microsurgery during its infancy and to develop it. He was a grand leader with great entrepreneurial and organisational skills who inspired and encouraged others and was generous in his praise of them. He had an abiding belief that Australians owed a debt to surgery as a result of their one way traffic overseas for training and that this should be repaid. He reversed the tide and established a mecca for clinical training and basic research in microsurgery which has few peers.

Bernard's premature death was a great loss to all who knew him; he was a great friend and a truly great Australian.

Credit: W. A. Morrison. British Journal of Plastic Surgery