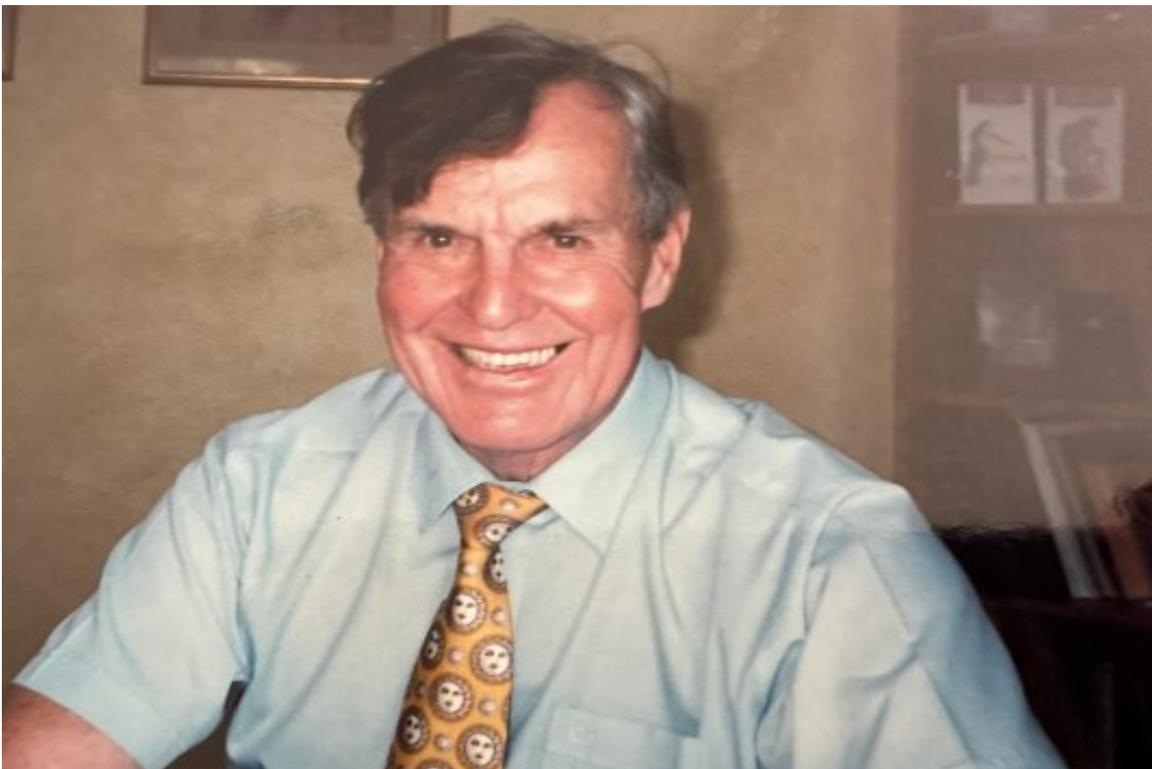


Plastic surgeon was at forefront of techniques in Australia

DR DESMOND MAURICE VINCENT REA: 1925 – 2023

When my father-in-law met our baby daughter, his first comment was “She has a nicely sculpted philtrum.” This was indeed a compliment, if delivered rather clinically, from a man whose long career was keenly focused on anatomy and the appearance of the human body.

Desmond Rea was a well-respected plastic surgeon; he was part of the first generation of highly skilled doctors to be recognised as a separate specialty trade, in 1956, by the Royal Australian College of Surgeons. His career was of note for its variety – he worked in the fields of hand surgery and peripheral nerve injuries, burns, amputations and limb trauma, and the more aesthetic procedures for the face, breasts and nose.



Dr Desmond Rea.

He also had a long career, aided by a law degree he completed in his 50s. He was still assessing medico-legal cases into his 80s after he'd stopped operating. Desmond was one of five expert witnesses in a case a few years ago against the Murrumbidgee Local Health District which resulted in a significant payout of more than \$1 million to a woman who suffered complications after hernia surgery.

Desmond was born in a private hospital in Wellington, New Zealand, and altogether felt he had a fortunate childhood, despite the effects of the Depression. There were six children sharing two bedrooms, and their father was frequently away selling insurance. Desmond described his mother as "lovely but undomesticated"; she raised them on eggs, fish and chips. He recalled people wearing clothes made from sugar sacks, and frequent pedlars at the front door, offering knife sharpening or odd jobs to make ends meet, and men being sent to relief camps from where they worked on the roads or other government projects.

He came from Irish stock and had a Catholic schooling, and like many of his young mates worked at a variety of places, helping out at the hardware shop, sorting mail at the post office or selling cigarettes and sweets at the theatre, in his brass-buttoned blazer and pillbox hat. He remembered that "from the age of five I would hop on a tram and go into Courtenay Place", a bustling part of Wellington, where he would sell the Saturday evening paper (which, he complained later, was full of sport and no real news).

After struggling during his first year at university, Desmond was thrilled to be accepted into medical school at New Zealand's oldest University, Otago, in Dunedin. In his year there were around 100 male and 25 female students. He supported himself with a government bursary, worked at the wool stores or meat works during his vacations, and skipped lunch most days. He initially boarded with a widow who provided his meals and did his washing. Later he lived closer to the campus and somehow inveigled himself into life at the Anglican Selwyn College, dining at the long tables, playing rugby, dressing as a Roman legion for the capping processions, and attending the various university balls in his dinner suit, and parties where they would sing around a piano.



Desmond Rea (right), date unknown.

Around the time that Desmond graduated from medical school, World War II was coming to an end. The horrific wounds that soldiers suffered during the two world wars resulted in significant advances in reconstructive and aesthetic surgery and led to the specialised discipline field of plastics.

Fellow New Zealanders were pioneers in this area and gained their skills on the battlefield and in hospitals in England. Sir Archibald McIndoe advanced the treatment and rehabilitation of burns victims; his cousin Sir Harold Gillies, considered the “father of plastic surgery”, developed new skin-grafting techniques and flap procedures, especially for disfiguring facial injuries. While completing surgical training in the UK Rae was fortunate to be encouraged by McIndoe and work under Gillies.



Plastic surgeon Sir Archibald McIndoe chats to a young patient at the Queen Victoria Hospital in East Grinstead, Sussex. *CREDIT: GETTY*

Rae was a founding member of the Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons, the peak body representing specialised cosmetic and reconstructive surgeons with at least five years post-graduate surgical training. At home, he was trained by many remarkable doctors including Australian-born Sir John Eccles, who later won a Nobel prize for his research, Verney Cable, who went on to perform the first cardiac catheterisation at the Wellington Hospital and the first haemodialysis in Australasia, and Sir Charles Burns, the first doctor to give insulin to a diabetic patient in a New Zealand hospital. Rae developed an interest in finer surgical techniques from the plastic surgeon Frank Hutter who had served at Dunkirk and was sent to the UK to be instructed by McIndoe and Gillies.

The field of aesthetics was introduced to Desmond when he moved to Sydney in 1960 and worked with Dr Graeme Humby, after whom the skin-grafting Humby knife is named. He noted that “What I did learn is how to discuss fees with patients. For example, the patient might ask Dr Humby if there was any pain with a certain procedure such as a facelift; he would assure them there was not, but then he would slap down an account, saying ‘that’s the pain’.”

Some customers would only pay by cash, such as the infamous late gangster Lenny McPherson, who desired a change in his facial appearance, and was said to offer “to fix any problem” Rae might have, as a goodwill gesture. Rae was an early adaptor in hair transplant surgery and was one of the first Sydney doctors to use hair plugs. I believe

the late Brian Henderson was one of many celebrities to attain his newsworthy unruffled hairline at Desmond's hands.

Desmond had commenced a memoir, unfinished, in which he wrote he "was one of the luckiest people imaginable" to have gotten into and completed medical school. In the memoir, he also makes frequent reference to his encounters with members of the opposite sex.

This attraction resulted in complicated family dynamics to rival any Liane Moriarty novel. Desmond was progressive medically and politically, but his domestic skills reflected his birthdate. The women in his life demonstrated great resilience, essentially left holding the babies as he sought perfection in his profession. Friendships even developed between the women in his life, which was remarkably wise and generous of them.

Desmond is survived by his wife of more than 30 years, Jacqueline, and their children Zachary and Alexandra, his daughter Elizabeth (by his first wife Maxine, deceased) and Nicholas, and Angela and their son Jeremy. He is also survived by five grandchildren.

Dr Marie Healy, GP

<https://www.theage.com.au/national/plastic-surgeon-was-at-forefront-of-techniques-in-australia-20230501-p5d4m1.html>