

THE ST JOHN JERUSALEM EYE HOSPITAL: A SUMMARY OF AUSTRALIA'S INVOLVEMENT

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In the 77 years Australia has had a national St John Ambulance organisation, eleven distinguished men have held the position of Hospitaller. The Hospitaller is the Priory Officer responsible for support for the St John Ophthalmic Hospital in Jerusalem, more familiarly known in recent years as the St John Jerusalem Eye Hospital Group. In order of appointment, the 11 have been:

- Brigadier Robert M Stodart (of Queensland, who held the position 1941–1942)
- Sir Donald Cameron (Queensland, 1943–1946)
- Major-General F Arthur Maguire (New South Wales, 1947–1952)
- Sir Kenneth Fraser (Queensland, 1953–1968)
- Dr Selwyn G Nelson (New South Wales, 1969–1986)
- Professor Gerard W Crock (Victoria, 1987–1996)
- Sir William Knox (Queensland, 1997–1998)
- Professor Frank A Billson (New South Wales, 1999–2005)
- Dr William ('Bill') J Glasson (Queensland, 2006–2008)
- Dr Michael J Campion (New South Wales, 2009–2015)
- Associate Professor Nitin Verma (Tasmania, 2015–present).

Australian support for the Eye Hospital has varied over time. Most commonly the support has been financial. For over 40 years, from the early 1940s until the mid-1980s, Australian fundraising for the Eye Hospital was conducted at the State/Territory level by various 'Ladies' Guilds' and 'Linen Guilds', that is women's auxiliaries which toiled to raise money through various enterprises. Eventually the notion of women's auxiliaries became passé; thereafter particular individuals tended to 'adopt' the Eye Hospital as a 'cause', often raising money from special events, for example an annual quiz night. In 2010 a more systematic approach was introduced with the establishment of a National Ophthalmic Committee headed by the Hospitaller. A further development, in 2016, was the foundation of the 'Friends of the Eye Hospital' scheme, through which supporters of the Eye Hospital Group could become registered 'Friends', pledging themselves to provide regular and continuing financial support.

An important innovation in Australian support for the Eye Hospital was introduced in 1969. This was the 'Ophthalmic Fellows' scheme, under which young Australian ophthalmologists were posted to the Hospital for a year as ophthalmological registrars. The scheme continued into the early 1990s; and while it was still in place, over 20 Australian Ophthalmic Fellows worked at the Hospital successively. The scheme had advantages for Australian ophthalmology as well as for the Hospital because the Fellows gained wide and intensive experience during their year in Jerusalem, developing skills which ultimately benefited their Australian patients. Unfortunately, the scheme ended because of the hazards of the political situation in Israel and Palestine. Instead of funding Australian ophthalmologists at the Hospital, the focus shifted to providing training at the Hospital for indigenous ophthalmologists and ophthalmological nurses. In addition, several of the Hospital's local medical professionals were brought to Australia for study and experience.

After first aid training, the Jerusalem Eye Hospital Group is the second oldest of the endeavours of the Most Venerable Order of St John. Founded in 1882, the Order's ophthalmic enterprise in Jerusalem has continued for 136 years. The work done by the Eye Hospital Group remains as vital and as critical as at any time in the Hospital's history. The mission of the Eye Hospital Group will accordingly continue to depend on the enthusiasm and generosity of the Priors of the Order, which, like the Australian Priory, have been the mainstay of its support.