

OBITUARIES

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Eye doctor to generations

**WILLIAM ELLIOTT GILLIES,
OAM
OPHTHALMOLOGIST
11-2-1926 — 4-12-2008**

BILL Gillies, who was a major influence on Australian ophthalmology for nearly half a century — he taught every Victorian ophthalmologist over more than 30 years — has died of pneumonia at a nursing home in Kew. He was 82.

Bill's legacy of teaching and dedicated care for his patients, which began in the 1950s, as well as his long service to the Royal Australian College of Ophthalmologists and to the Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital, was recognised in 2003 with the Medal of the Order of Australia.

An international authority on glaucoma and strabismus (squint), he was a friend of the late Fred Hollows and a strong supporter of the National Trachoma and Eye Health Survey, which was among the first studies to focus international attention on the plight of indigenous Australians.

He led a team that was responsible for the surgical treatment of people affected with cataract and trachoma in the Katherine region, and he was chairman of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists' Australian trachoma committee.

He was a past president of the RANZCO, and received the Colledge Medal in 2006 for distinguished, meritorious and selfless service to the college, the community, and medicine.

Bill was born at Woolloowin in Queensland, the eldest of three children of William and Mary (nee Elliott) Gillies.

He and his sisters, Marion and Joyce, were brought up within walking distance of East Brisbane State School and Church of England Grammar School, "Churchie", from where he matriculated in 1943.



He graduated in medicine from Queensland University in 1949, and was club champion at Northcliffe Surf Life Saving Club — the previous year he was Queensland belt and reel champion at Kirra Surf Life Saving Club.

Also a champion swimmer, Bill was Queensland medley champion from 1945 to 1948, and represented Queensland University in swimming, where he competed against a young backstroker from Western Australia, Rolf Harris. He received a blue for water polo.

In 1952, Bill began post-graduate qualifications as an ophthalmologist in Melbourne, and he started a lifelong link with the Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital when he became a resident medical officer. In 1953, he received a diploma of ophthalmology from Melbourne University, and the following year he was a member of Melbourne Rugby Club Premiership team. (Later, he

played for Wasps in London.)

In 1954 he set off for Britain on SS Port Pirie to further his medical qualifications, and on the journey fell in love with the ship's surgeon, Nancy Ferguson; they married in London the following year.

He received his Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons from Edinburgh in 1957, and worked at Moorfield's Glaucoma Clinic in London, before returning in 1958 (as a ship's surgeon) to Melbourne and his beloved RVEEH. He held numerous senior positions at the hospital over 30 years, including director of the glaucoma investigation and research unit, and chief of medical staff. And he presided over the special teaching clinic for decades.

Bill had a large private clinical practice, where his first patient was booked for 8am each morning. But for some arcane point of professional honour, he never arrived before

9.30am. Every lunchtime he walked up to the RVEEH, where he conducted public clinics, research and teaching. Although he only retired when he turned 80, it was still too soon for his devoted patients.

Bill's many other interests ranged from a collection of Chinese snuff bottles, an enviable wine cellar, and farming Angus cattle at Highlands, near Yea. For many years his house garden in East Melbourne was exhibited in the Open Garden Scheme.

He and Nancy were enthusiastic and curious travellers, leaving few parts of the globe untrudged. Their travel was often combined with another great interest, opera. They visited Bayreuth a number of times to delight in Wagner's *Ring* cycle — 15 hours of performance spread over 4 days.

At home, he was always an early riser; his four children spent their childhood being woken at 6am by the sounds of *Ride of the Valkyries* blasting through the family home in Heidelberg.

Bill had a strong belief in the power of institutions to bind society together, and fought hard to ensure that ophthalmology remained separate and distinct with its own structures. Otherwise, he argued, technical and ethical standards would decline and the quality of the care of patients would not recover.

On a practical level, this meant defending the independence of the RVEEH. Not for him the easy transition to a bigger institution with the "promise" of larger budgets and shiny new clinics; all he saw was the eventual sublimation of ophthalmology in a general hospital.

He is survived by his devoted wife of 53 years, Nancy, and his four children, Bill, Mark, Fiona and Charles, and 11 grandchildren.

This tribute was prepared by Bill Gillies' children.