

# Memorial Tribute to Prof Brian F Buxton

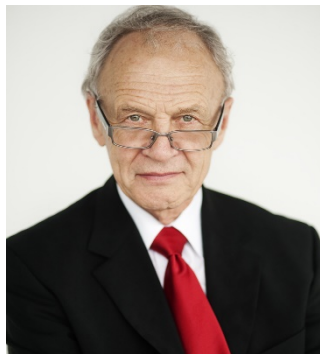
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A wise ancient Greek, Sophocles, once said:

*"One must wait until the evening to see how splendid the day has been"*

Brian Buxton one could see the brightness emanating from his being early on. He exuded a palpable optimistic dynamism that was irrepressible. A glow that illuminated the lives and career paths of so many! Brian Buxton was a great Cardiac Surgeon. He was able to effortlessly perform complex operations with exquisite skill that others found challenging. He was a Surgeon's Surgeon. The finest Coronary Artery Surgeon Australia has, or is ever likely to produce. Moreover, Brian was one of the three most prominent coronary artery surgeons in the world, over the past three decades. There are very few Cardiac Surgeons in the world who do not know his name and of his contributions. He was respected, admired and held in the greatest esteem by all in Cardiac Surgery. Through his endeavors Melbourne became a beacon on the world stage, for Coronary Artery Surgery.



Brian graduated in Medicine with honours from the University of Melbourne in 1962 at 22, well ahead of his time, which would be the theme of Brian's life!

His early medical career in the 1960s, was at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, predominantly in general surgery in a time before the advent of surgical specialties. He was focused, committed to surgical training, and obtained his fellowship of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS) in 1967 at the tender age of 27. Yet finding the time to court and marry Pamela Habersberger in 1966. Although a child of the 60s, he was not into flower power, but did have great fun.

Whilst at the Royal Melbourne, Brian was part of a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital ("MASH") team of surgical and nursing volunteers that went to Vietnam. For those familiar with the movie or TV series Brian was definitely "Chest cutter" status. Soon thereafter, with his young family, Brian left for further training in Scotland via locum surgical appointments in Kuwait and Zambia. In Glasgow, in 1970, as well as training in general surgery, he undertook a Master of Surgery in gastric physiology.

Brian soon discovered that stomach surgery was not for him. It was the time of opening of frontiers in surgery, especially cardiac surgery.

Coronary bypass surgery was just emerging, and the first successful heart valve replacements had only recently been performed. It was enthralling and inspiring medicine, coupled with unlimited potential - the flowering of Cardiac Surgery.

Brian was captivated and wanted to be part of it and the future it offered. He audaciously called Denton Cooley, one of the two most famous cardiac surgeons in the world at that time, organized a position at the Texas Heart Institute in Houston, and never looked back. The early 1970s were heady days. There was an explosion in cardiac surgery: coronary bypasses, valve replacement, heart transplants and artificial hearts. These innovations were all in cardiac surgery. Angioplasty, stents, and statins, had not been invented. The only cardiac drug was digitalis. CT scans were still five years into the future and cardiac ultrasound was often a set of almost incomprehensible squiggly lines. Houston was the Centre of the cardiac surgery universe, and Brian was there! These were the most formative years of his career under the mentorship of the legendary Denton Cooley. Brian modelled himself on Cooley and his operating techniques.

Brian considered staying in the USA, but settled for positions in Melbourne in cardiovascular surgery at the Austin, Repatriation General and Royal Melbourne Hospitals. His career path included appointment as head of cardiac surgery at the Austin in 1979, establishment of Cardiac Surgery at Epworth hospital, Richmond in 1981 and a professorial appointment in the University of Melbourne in 1990. Brian was a fellow of many cardiothoracic organizations, nationally and internationally.



The most significant recognitions for his achievements were: Order of Australia, the annual solitary Excellence in Surgery Award from the RACS, The Maxwell Chamberlain Memorial Prize from the Society of Thoracic Surgeons of America and the Lifetime Achievement Recognition Award from the International Society for Coronary Artery Surgery. He was also only the second Australian to be elected a fellow of the American Association for Thoracic Surgery.

Brian's personal qualities were inextricably linked with his surgical career. Brian was charismatic, smart, curious, driven, constantly in pursuit of excellence and improvement, incredibly well read, affable, disarmingly charming, warm and generous. However his greatest qualities were more far reaching. At a deeper, more profound level who was Brian Buxton?

How did he obtain his deserved stature? What made Brian special? What were his accomplishments? He was a visionary.

Brian's philosophy was to think positively. The question was never "Why?" but rather, "Why not?" He constructed the University of Melbourne Cardiac Surgery Database in 1979 with John McNeil, with now over 30,000 patients. An institutional database only second to the Cleveland clinic, 20 years ahead of the Australasian Cardiac Surgery database, and the source of over 100 publications. This was followed by establishing, with colleagues The Australian and New Zealand Society of Cardiac and Thoracic Surgeons (ANZSCTS) Victorian and National Database. He also championed arterial grafting from its outset in 1981. Brian established The Department of Cardiac Surgery at the Austin hospital and supervised the building of the cardiac surgery operating rooms there. Brian established cardiac surgery at Epworth Hospital with Dr Graeme Sloman, Peter Wilson (manager), Dr Jack Cade and Dr George Westlake, despite opposition from the cardiac surgery establishment in Melbourne at the time. Within 10 years over 1,100 cardiac operations were being performed at Epworth with superb results. Brian founded the Australian and New Zealand Society of Cardiothoracic surgeons with Prof. Frank Rosenfeldt and was its inaugural president and helped create Heart, Lung and Circulation journal, with Prof. Frank Rosenfeldt, the founding editor. Brian was a surgical pioneer and innovator in arterial grafting including bilateral internal mammary, inferior epigastric, radial, and ulnar artery grafts.

Brian was magnanimous in his help, support and encouragement of young surgeons around him. He saw them as colleagues and flagbearers, not as competition.

Thus, he trained over 50 young cardiac surgeons from Australia, New Zealand and many other parts of the world.

Brian was an academic and researcher authoring over 350 publications including many book chapters and a classic textbook on coronary surgery. He gave hundreds of presentations at national and international meetings. He designed and conducted the world's largest and longest randomized trial in coronary graft patency and outcomes the Radial Artery Patency and Clinical Outcomes (RAPCO) Trial to compare the long-term patency of the radial artery with the saphenous vein. In his "spare time" supervised ten PhD students, especially in coronary graft physiology and pharmacology.

Brian Buxton was the finest of technical coronary surgeons, ambidextrous, light of touch, unhurried, efficient, calm and assured with equanimity under pressure. Brian operated with grace and beauty, an elegance of surgery tempered by a frugality of movement. It was a joy to watch him operate. Brian was a skilled communicator, able to speak to

colleagues, friends, and patients easily and naturally. He was direct, relaxed and charming. His interactions and conversations with all were personal, never distant nor generic. He made significant contributions to, was admired, revered and treated with gravitas within professional associations, particularly those of Singapore, Indonesia, China, and Thailand where he enjoyed operating.

Although in his element in the operating theatre, Brian loved the outdoors.

He was an adventurer. He explored the deserts of Australia and of America, including Death Valley, travelled to Antarctica, walked Kokoda, loved sailing, was an avid reader and collector of books by and of Australian explorers, and was fascinated by history.



Brian wanted to exit from the pinnacle of the Cardiac and Coronary world stage at the peak of his powers. It takes great courage for a gifted surgeon to do this but that was what defined him for over 40 years.

Pamela, his first wife was a pillar of strength, of wise counsel and key to his early success, as was the support and understanding of his children - Michelle, Andy, Julie, and Suzie.

So where does the power come from, to see the journey through? In Brian, it was his innate drive, irrepressible optimism, foresight, and a commitment to excellence. All qualities Brian had in abundance. So when life's race has been run and the finishing tape has fallen away and even the brightest flame extinguished, how is a great human, as Brian Buxton undoubtedly was, to be remembered?

What constitutes greatness? I put to you, in Brian left a prodigious medical LEGACY, unrivalled in our specialty in Australia, and unique even internationally. Over 20,000 lives saved, prolonged, or improved with the extended benefits to the families of those patients over generations. His hundreds of publications and presentations on techniques and knowledge to the cardiac community that have profoundly influenced the practice of, and the results in coronary surgery. Perhaps the most profound legacy, is that of the young surgeons he mentored and trained, now all leaders in their countries including Australia - all using their skills to operate, heal and teach others, an effect that will multiply and last generations. His

teaching and techniques remain with us as we conduct our professional lives. What a wonderful way to be remembered!

Although Brian's flame is extinguished, we all bask in its afterglow and carry a part of Brian's spirit with us, subconsciously coming to the fore at times - operating, visiting the Austin or Epworth, seeing an arterial coronary graft angiogram, talking to a colleague, a patient, to the Buxton family or simply reminiscing.

He will always be part of us as he has touched us in some unassailable way. Farewell friend, colleague, mentor, visionary, pioneer, builder, academic, and master surgeon.

To return to the wise Greek from antiquity,  
"One must wait until the evening to see how splendid the day has been"  
one could say about Brian's life, that - "the day has been splendid indeed!"

Vale Brian Buxton,  
A towering figure in Cardiac Surgery.  
The Surgeon's Surgeon.  
The best of his generation.