OBITUARY

Micheal George Knipe AM BOptom (Hons) FACO MBA FAICD
PGCOT

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In the late 1990s, when I was president of the Tasmanian Division of the then Australian Optometrical Association (now Optometry Australia), I received a telephone call from Micheal Knipe (Figure 1). He needed my assistance with a project he had started.

At the time, the Royal Hobart Hospital had significant pressure on their eye outpatient clinics. Micheal saw a role for optometry in alleviating the burden and had a plan. He wanted to talk to me about his ideas, budget and future personnel that could aid the establishment of the clinic. What I did not know at the time was that these three or four phone conversations were mirroring multiple other eye-care-related projects that Micheal had undertaken both before and after this exchange.

Micheal had the ability to see a need, the acumen to devise a workable solution, and the drive and interpersonal skills to see the project through. In the Royal Hobart Hospital project he had enough initial support from a few key players, but met the usual barriers of setting up a very novel clinic – that is, a very cautious bureaucracy. He overcame those barriers, and the resultant clinics have stood the test of time. Looking back through Micheal’s professional life, I can see the same process evident in his very successful work at Optometry Australia, ProVision, East Timor and within his own group practice. The continuation of his initiatives over time is the measure of the man.

Early years

Micheal George Knipe was born in Cessnock, New South Wales, on 2 January 1955. He was educated at the local St Patrick’s Primary School and Maitland Marist Brothers’ secondary school. He then set off to Sydney to complete his optometry degree, with honours, at the University of New South Wales in 1976. Like many young adults with an interest in science, Micheal chose optometry as a science-based vocation, but quickly developed a true love of the profession.

Upon graduation in 1977, Micheal headed down to Tasmania for temporary experience, with the initial aim of working for a year or so and then moving on. In common with a number of mainlanders before and since who have experienced a taste of professional and private life in the ‘Apple Isle’, he never left.

Micheal joined a Hobart practice that had been established by Ken Iredale in 1946. Brian Sims, who was Ken Iredale’s practice partner at the time, is one of only two Tasmanians to have been recognised for services to optometry with an award within the Order of Australia; Micheal is the other.

When asking of people’s memory of Micheal, the words used in response were: smart, compassionate, honourable, decent, dedicated, committed – but most of all, that he participated. Micheal did not simply turn up to events; he worked hard on committees and always strived to achieve change. He seemingly never operated alone, preferring to work with others, building teams of like-minded colleagues. The focus of Micheal’s work in optometry was around independence, the value of public health care and establishing self-sustaining health systems. All his endeavours were never far away from his principal professional love, providing up to date optometric care to his loyal patient base.

Getting involved in Tasmanian professional affairs

On arriving in Tasmania, Micheal did not take long to get involved in the Tasmanian Division of the Australian Optometrical Association. He quickly joined the Board, became secretary/treasurer and subsequently served as president. Micheal went on to be a member of the National Board of Optometry Australia, with a stint as national president starting in 2010. Not just the altruist, he loved the politics and keeping up with any gossip that accompanied the various political endeavours in which he was involved.1

Helping build ProVision

Two years after the Australian Optometrical Association established Australia’s Independent Optometrists – a co-operative for independent optometrists, which later became ProVision – Micheal joined its board. The year was 1991, and Micheal threw himself
into helping build up the organisation into an extensive business support network. He served as chair of the board for 16 years (1993 to 2009).

Micheal articulated a vision and he understood the role of chairman and carried it out in meetings; but he performed a far wider leadership role out of meetings, putting in many voluntary hours.1 During his time as chair, ProVision consolidated and flourished, even in times of significant change in the regulations and guidelines of ownership and presentation of optometric practices.

A fellow board member recounted that Micheal was a great chair, with his ability to involve and listen to others during meetings. Over this period, he was able to easily grasp the landscape, develop a plan and help drive the implementation. Another colleague characterised Micheal as: ‘Always with a moderate, principled view’. True to type, Micheal, during this period with ProVision, sought to educate himself in business principles and practice, completing both a Graduate Diploma of Business in Professional Management and a Master of Business Administration in 1995.

**The East Timor Eye Program**

During the time of his involvement with ProVision, Micheal was introduced to the East Timor Eye Program by ophthalmological colleague Dr Nitin Verma and practice partner Andrew Koch. Initially, Micheal’s involvement was to assist funding for Andrew Koch and then also Andrew Maver, to go to Timor Leste to participate in a new volunteer eye-care program.

Micheal was profoundly affected by Andrew Koch’s reflections on returning from his first volunteer visit in 2002, and threw himself into working on a plan that would not only assist the local population in the short term, but would build self-sustaining local systems. He knew that there needed to be more funding to keep the project going. Micheal convinced ProVision to initially promote the program among the network of ProVision optometrists and provide program funding. He then convinced a newly established charity – Optometry Giving Sight – to make the East Timor Eye Program its charity of choice. Always wanting to be involved, Micheal joined the National Committee of Optometry Giving Sight in 2007.

In an interview about his work in Timor Leste in 2015, Micheal observed ‘Now there are trained primary and tertiary eye-care personnel with more in the pipeline. A national eye centre has been established at the national hospital in Dili and there is a network of vision centres throughout East Timor, staffed by trained East Timorese, and supported by visits from the national eye centre. Progressively, equipment has been provided and people have been trained to use it. There are now a number of locations in Dili where people can obtain spectacles. Spectacle supply outside of Dili is still very restricted and efforts are ongoing to address this.’2 Micheal’s aims were evident: he was looking beyond a cargo cult of care, to a self-sustaining system that enhances local provision of services.

Micheal went to Timor Leste seven times, as well as helping co-ordinate multiple trips by optometric colleagues. Andrew Maver remembers of this time: ‘It was stinking hot and humid. Mike would be dripping wet from perspiration and I had to constantly nag him to stop and have a drink of water. Otherwise he would have just kept on going until completely dehydrated.’ In more recent times, Micheal made several visits to Sri Lanka to scope how Australia could assist in the development of eye care in that country.

**Supporting clinical optometric education**

Locally, Micheal was also solving problems in optometric education. In the 2000s, undergraduate and post-graduate students at the University of New South Wales were needing clinical placements for their therapeutics qualifications because they could not find places in their own state. Micheal approached the Royal Hobart Hospital and local Tasmanian optometrists for these much-needed placements, which they offered for over 10 years. Micheal saw a need and found a practical solution.

**Honours and awards**

Although not one to seek the limelight, Micheal’s work was recognised by others. In 2011, his birthplace, Cessnock, inducted Micheal into its Hall of Fame. The Tasmanian Division of Optometry Australia presented him with the Certificate of Merit in 2014. On Australia Day in 2015, Micheal was invested as a Member of the Order of Australia ‘for significant service to optometry through executive roles with professional organisations, and to the community of East Timor’.

Responding to the Order of Australia honour, Micheal said ‘I get enormous satisfaction in seeing those I’ve helped develop and succeed. I get a buzz from seeing something that was only an idea come to fruition and actually work. And I like the idea that, in the near future, I and the East Timor Eye Program will no longer be needed as the East Timorese become self-sufficient.’

**Epilogue**

Micheal died on February 7, 2019. Despite more than 10 years of failing health toward the end of his life, Micheal’s drive did not diminish. On his passing, Micheal’s colleague Andrew Koch at Total Eyecare wrote in their newsletter: ‘Micheal had big boots ... he will be remembered as a person with strong values, as a caring mentor and as someone who has influences and inspired.’

Outside the profession, Micheal will be remembered as a gregarious man with a strong social network and that he enjoyed a fine glass of red wine. He was fiercely proud of his family, and was a besotted grandfather. Micheal is survived by his wife Caroline, children Sophie, Henry and Elle, and grandchildren.

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**REFERENCES**