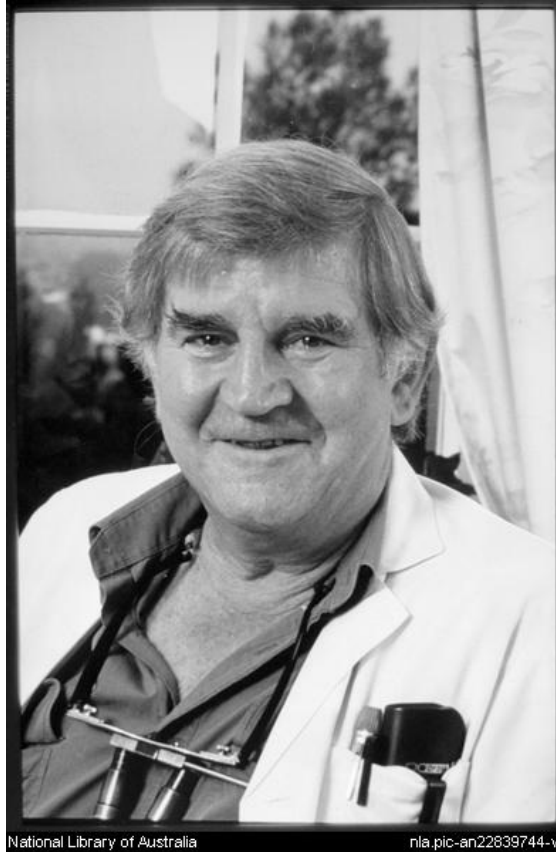


Frederick Cossom (Fred) Hollows

“A humanitarian in the fullest sense of the term”



“The essence of a human being is our capacity to help others; it is what separates us from the animals. I studied medicine so I could help others - set a leg or whatever, and it's given me a great deal of satisfaction.” - Fred Hollows

Frederick Hollows was born on 9th April 1929 in Dunedin, New Zealand to Joseph and his wife Clarice (Marshall) Hollows. He was one of four children, the others being Colin, John, and Maurece. It was a working class family and it instilled in the young Fred a sense of justice. The family lived in Dunedin for the first seven years of his life. While there, he attended one year of formal primary schooling at North East Valley Primary School before moving

to Palmerston North Boys' High School when he was 13. At school he joined several clubs and played trumpet in the band.

Hollows received his BA degree from the Victoria University of Wellington. Following this he initially attended Bible College in Dunedin, dabbling with the idea of joining the clergy. However, after a short time in a seminary Fred discovered he wasn't cut out to be a clergyman. Instead, he enrolled at medical school at Otago University, New Zealand, where he decided to become an 'eye doctor' - a trade he described as "good work".

Fred always had a passion for mountain climbing and studying at Otago University enabled him to make use of the spectacular mountainous backdrop. He often spent time climbing with friends on and around Mt Cook, New Zealand's highest peak. For him the mountain *"put things into perspective - risks and skills, life and death, gives you the measure of problems and people."*



Fred Hollows (second from right) and friends mountaineering in the 1960s.

Hollows was a member of the Communist Party of New Zealand during the 1950s and 1960s.

In 1961 he went to Moorfields Eye Hospital in England to study ophthalmology. He then did post-graduate work in Wales before moving to Australia in 1965 where he became Associate Professor of Ophthalmology at the University of New South Wales in Sydney. From 1965-1992 he chaired the ophthalmology division, overseeing the teaching departments at the University of New South Wales and the Prince of Wales and Prince Henry hospitals.

Fred always believed strongly in equality for all people. He was told about the need for Aboriginal health services in Sydney and discovered that almost all Aboriginal people in outback communities had eye diseases caused by dirty conditions and poor health - problems that he considered could be easily avoided. In the 1970's, he helped launch a national program to attack eye disease among Aboriginal Australians.

In three years the team travelled all over outback Australia. It treated 30,000 people, performed a thousand operations and prescribed more than 10,000 pairs of glasses. Fred became to be known as the 'wild colonial boy' of Australian surgery, partly because he had a deep love of the bush, and partly because he had a wild temper! He had no time for anyone who stood between him and his goals. "When I've seen an opportunity I haven't sat down and called a committee meeting" he said. "We've gone and done it. He was very outspoken on this issue of Aboriginal health. "It's appalling.," He said. "much worse than white health was in the worst times of the depression. It's appalling by third world standards." While his gruff manner certainly made him some enemies, he was both loved and admired by those who knew him well

But by 1989 Fred Hollows knew he wouldn't live to see all his ideas happen. He was dying of cancer.

It didn't slow him down...and instead of getting miserable Fred thought himself lucky.

"I have been lucky in that I've been alive at times when the things that I wanted to do were capable of being done."

In 1993, Fred died at home surrounded by his friends, his wife Gabi and their five children

Hollows married twice: in 1958 to Mary Skiller, who died in 1975, and in 1980 to Gabi O'Sullivan

Early in the 1970s, Hollows visited isolated New South Wales towns and stations and Aboriginal communities. He became especially concerned with the high number of Aborigines who had eye disorders, particularly trachoma, (Ancient Greek: "rough eye") an infectious eye disease, and the leading cause of the world's infectious blindness.

In 1971, with Mum (Shirl) Smith and others, he set up the Aboriginal Medical Service in suburban Redfern in Sydney, and was subsequently responsible for the establishment of medical services for Aboriginal People throughout Australia.

Fred first visited isolated New South Wales towns and stations and Aboriginal communities in Australia in the 1960s and was shocked by the deplorable standards of eye health.

"It was like something out of the medical history books," he said, "eye diseases of a kind and degree that hadn't been seen in western society for generations! The neglect this implied, the suffering and wasted quality of human life were appalling."

He became especially concerned with the high number of Aborigines who had eye defects, particularly trachoma.

In the 1970s Fred began his work with Aboriginal communities in Australia. He helped establish the Aboriginal Medical Service in Redfern, Sydney, in 1971 and was instrumental in the establishment of other Aboriginal Medical Services throughout Australia.

During this time, Fred also dedicated three years to visiting Indigenous communities in rural Australia with a team of colleagues to survey and provide eye care services. The results were published and in the late 1970's,

with funding from the Australian Government and The Royal Australian and New Zealand college of Ophthalmologists, the ground-breaking The National Trachoma and Eye Health Program (NTEHP) was commenced.

The NTEHP set out to eliminate trachoma and other eye conditions in rural and remote communities and, for the first time, record the status of eye health in rural Australia.

From 1976-1978, over 465 communities were visited, 100,000 people screened, 27,000 people treated for trachoma and 1,000 operations performed. As a result of the program, Fred Hollows championed the treatment of trachoma and other eye diseases, which were prevalent among Aboriginal people.

Fred received many awards that recognised his dedication and determination. In 1981, he received an Advance Australia Award, but was appalled at what he called blatant government disinterest in eye care for Aboriginal people, so refused to accept the Order of Australia. Nonetheless, he became an Australian citizen in 1989.



Fred Hollows at work

After attending a conference in Egypt, Fred made his first visit to war-torn Eritrea in 1987. While there, he saw first hand the effects the war was having on medical services and supplies in Eritrea. An underground hospital and medical manufacturing factories had been set up in the mountains, while the war raged around them.

Realising that people in developing countries, like Nepal and Eritrea, were suffering from blindness because of a lack of basic medical resources Fred decided to work towards reducing the cost of eye health care and treatment in developing countries. As his second wife Gabi said *"He decided then and there, that if they could do that underground, they could make intraocular lenses (IOLs) underground too, if they had to. Cataracts were the most common form of blindness in the country, caused in part by poor nutrition and significantly by the extraordinary brilliant light of this desert country all year around."* That was the beginning of Fred's campaign to build a lens factory in Eritrea."

In 1991, a year after Fred's second trip to Eritrea, he received honorary citizenship in Eritrea. Fred also visited Nepal and Vietnam. The previous year he had been awarded a Human Rights medal and named Australian of the Year.

His visits to Nepal in 1985, Eritrea in 1987, and Vietnam in 1991 resulted in training programs to train local technicians to perform eye surgery. Hollows organized intraocular lens laboratories in Eritrea and Nepal to manufacture and provide lenses at cost, which was about A\$10 (approximately US\$9) each.

In 1992 The Fred Hollows Foundation was established to provide eye care for the underprivileged and poor, and to improve the health of indigenous Australians.

A controversy unfolded in March 1992, when Hollows spoke at the Alice Springs National Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Conference. His approach to this topic

was straight to the point. Hollows argued that some areas of the AIDS campaign were being inadequately dealt with. According to *The Australian's* Martin Thomas, Hollows stated that some homosexuals were "recklessly spreading the virus". Therefore, the safe sex campaign was an inadequate way of dealing with the issue. To contain the disease, Hollows argued that promiscuity needed to be addressed. Hollows observed the spread of AIDS in contemporary African communities and he was concerned that AIDS would spread as vehemently through Aboriginal communities. Clearly Hollows infuriated some sections of the community with his comments, but apparently did not cause widespread condemnation.

Early in the 1970s, Hollows worked with the Gurindji people at Wave Hill in the Northern Territory and then with the people around Bourke and other isolated New South Wales towns, stations and Aboriginal communities. He became especially concerned with the high number of Aborigines who had eye disorders, particularly trachoma. In July 1971, with Mum (Shirl) Smith and others, he set up the Aboriginal Medical Service in suburban Redfern in Sydney, and subsequently assisted in the establishment of medical services for Aboriginal People throughout Australia.

He is responsible for organising the Royal Australian College of Ophthalmologists to establish the National Trachoma and Eye Health Program (the "Trachoma Program") 1976-1978, with funding by the Federal Government. Hollows himself spent three years visiting Aboriginal communities to provide eye care and carry out a survey of eye defects. More than 460 Aboriginal communities were visited, and 62,000 Aboriginal People were examined, leading to 27,000 being treated for trachoma and 1,000 operations being carried out.

Hollows died in Sydney in 1993 at the age of 63. The cause of his death was metastatic renal cancer primarily affecting his lungs and brain. He had been diagnosed with the disease six years earlier. He was survived by his wife Gabi Hollows, seven children and two grandchildren.

He was given a state funeral service at St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney, and, in accordance with his wishes, was interred in Bourke, where he had worked in the early 1970s.

Fred Hollows first visited [Bourke](#), a northern NSW country town in Australia in the early 1970s, as the Chair of the Division of Ophthalmology at the University of New South Wales, Prince of Wales/Prince Henry Teaching Hospitals.

His eye team held their first clinic at the showgrounds, later relocating regular weekend clinics to Bourke District Hospital. They were welcomed in true Bourke spirit and provided services to other communities in the district, including Brewarrina, Cobar, Enngonia, Walgett, and Wilcannia. These vital screening and surgical services are continued today by the Eye Team from the Department of Ophthalmology at the Prince of Wales Hospital in Sydney.

Pretty much everyone in the district knew Fred and had a story about him to tell anyone who would listen. Whether it be about how he treated their eyes, how he swore at them, cajoled them, joked or shared a yarn with them. Fred Hollows always left a lasting impression.

Fred had a very special relationship with Bourke. He spent a lot of time there and made many good and lifelong friends as a result. Gabi and the family treasure these friendships and the deep ties they share with the local community.

The following account of his funeral is taken from the website of the Fred Hollows Foundation. http://www.hollows.org/Fred_Bourke/

On 17 February 1993, after an official state funeral at St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney, and in accordance with his own wishes, Fred Hollows was laid to rest in Bourke, where the red dirt and mulgas signal the start of the outback, which he loved so much.

Family and friends gathered in Bourke to farewell Fred. After first visiting the Aboriginal Medical Service, Fred's procession then travelled through town to *Kinchela*, a nearby property just outside of Bourke, where everyone shared their memories and stories at a wake hosted by locals Malcolm and Jan Fraser and Ian and Merle Fraser.

A moving service was conducted Fred's graveside in [Bourke Cemetery](#) by renowned Ophthalmologist and Sacred Heart priest, Father Frank Flynn, and Jesuit priest Father Frank Brennan.

Fred was buried with his glasses, a bottle of whisky, letters from some of his children, sawdust from his workshop, his pipe and a tin of tobacco. His coffin was draped with a pall lovingly hand painted by the people of Enngonia, a tiny village near the Queensland border, located 100 km north of Bourke.

Fred's grave site is surrounded by beautiful native trees and encircled by boulders from nearby Mt Oxley which are laid out in the shape of an eye, and are part of a sculpture which includes the carved standing stone transported from Wilcannia.

Local indigenous artists, international sculptors and Bourke residents carved the sandstone memorial at the western end of the site and produced the 64 "eye" perimeter boulders symbolising Fred's age when he died.

One of Australia's best known sculptors, Laurence Beck, in close association with many Bourke residents placed the rocks in the sculptural position. A plaque was erected, which reads: *Fred Hollows - Eye Doctor. "The key he used to undo locks was vision for the poor"* The quotation is from a poem by Bruce Walker.*

In February 2006, the original gravestone was replaced with a new granite sculpture, commissioned by the Hollows' family, created by Austrian sculptor

[Andreas Buisman](#) and erected with the generous support of friends, the Bourke Shire Council and local community.

On 17 February in 2006, on the 13th anniversary of Fred's burial, Gabi Hollows joined more than 150 family, friends and locals at a ceremony at Fred's graveside in Bourke Cemetery to unveil a new monument to Fred.

The sculpture is a fitting tribute to Fred, capturing the many aspects of his personality, particularly his love of nature, the outdoors and climbing. The Hollows' family invite visitors to touch and feel the rock, to climb on it or sit peacefully and contemplate life.

For them, the polished surface of this new installation is reminiscent of the surface of those small medical marvels, pieces of clinical grade perspex called intraocular lenses. IOLs replace the natural damaged lens of the eye and restore sight to those living with cataract blindness.

A smoking ceremony by members of the indigenous community and a re-dedication by Father Brennan, with speeches from Gabi and family and friends were a fitting tribute to Fred, with the new sculpture bringing new life to Fred's final resting place.



Fred Hollow's grave site in Bourke

***Fred's in Bourke**

I went to Bourke to bury Fred,
To lay a good man down,
But found his spirit wasn't dead,
It filled the whole damn town.

People came to honour him,
From halfway round the Earth,
They spoke at length about how Fred,
Had filled their lives with worth.

On how he'd given goals to reach,
And made the blind see,
The humblest of these travelled folk,
Were filled with dignity.

So these tales were unfurled,
Like the flying of Fred's flag,
And we all listened, breathless like,
While sitting on our swag.

The tellers formed an endless line,
As each one's tale was told,
Emotions sprang from deep within,
And tears, no one could hold.

Stories came on how our Mate,
Could open any door,
The key he used to undo locks was
Vision For The Poor.

(Featured in "On the Spur of the Moment" by Bruce Walker)

Sources

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