Obituary

Sir Brian Gerald Barratt-Boyes
Died 7th March 2006—Aged 82

Alan R. Kerr
18 Essex Road, Mt Eden, Auckland, New Zealand

Pioneering New Zealand heart surgeon Sir Brian Barratt-Boyes died recently following aortic and mitral valve surgery at the Cleveland Clinic. Sir Brian led the team which established open-heart surgery in New Zealand in 1958 and his subsequent achievements established him as an international leader in this rapidly developing specialty.

Born in Wellington, Brian was educated at Wellington College and Otago University Medical School. After early surgical training in Wellington and Palmerston North Hospitals he obtained his FRACS in General Surgery in 1952, a rare achievement at a time when most New Zealand surgeons went to Britain for postgraduate training. He became a Fellow at the Mayo Clinic from 1952–1955, working with John Kirklin in the early days of heart surgery. He held a Nuffield scholarship at Bristol University in 1956. Returning to New Zealand in 1957 he took over leadership of a team which had been fostered by his predecessor Sir Douglas Robb. In 1958, he successfully performed the first open-heart operation in N.Z.; closure of a ventricular septal defect in a 10-year-old girl. He quickly established Greenlane Hospital as an international leader in the treatment of congenital heart defects. Notable amongst the major achievements which followed was his work with allograft aortic valve replacement first performed in 1962 (independent of and almost simultaneous with Sir Donald Ross in London). He contributed actively to tissue valve research almost until his death.

His passion was paediatric cardiac surgery and his work, starting in 1969 with the use of deep hypothermic circulatory arrest in young infants, led to techniques which were quickly adopted worldwide.

Brian was a single minded man with clear goals and a vision for the future. He combined high intelligence and superb technical expertise. His drive and charisma inspired his team during the often traumatic formative years of the specialty. He was a superb teacher and attracted many overseas visiting surgeons and trainees. Several of those who worked with him have had distinguished careers worldwide, leading major departments in Australia, India, Britain, Thailand and America.

The book “Cardiac Surgery” which he co-authored with John Kirklin was by his own assessment his greatest contribution. This was the product of several years of work and considerable conflict but was finally published in 1985 and has since become the classic text. It is now in the third edition. It is unique among major medical textbooks in that the first two editions were entirely written by just two authors rather than the usual multi-author format.

This was all achieved at considerable cost to his own health. He developed angina and required coronary artery surgery in 1974 and again on two subsequent occasions. It is a tribute to his dedication that he continued to work with undiminished vigour, establishing the first private cardiac surgical department in N.Z. after years of frustrating struggles with the public health bureaucracy.

He became a national icon. He was awarded a K.B.E. in 1971 and received innumerable awards from many countries including recognition from the Pope. Only last year he was awarded the Distinguished Alumni Award from the Mayo Clinic. He declined many lucrative offers to work overseas preferring to continue in the department he had developed.

He was hugely respected and admired by all who worked with him and much loved by his many patients.

He is survived by his wife Sara and two stepchildren and his first wife Norma, their five sons and their families.