

Editorial

Maurice Brumer's trials and tribulations

Victoria optometrist Maurice Brumer's 32-year long dispute with the organisers of meetings of the now-defunct Section 7, Optometry, Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science, with the Victorian College of Optometry and with leaders and floor members of the Australian Optometrical Association (now Optometrists Association Australia) must surely now be brought to an end, following his vindication by the national AOA, even though it was OAA Victoria that hounded him from its membership, not once but twice, for his beliefs about the causes and treatment of myopia.

Mr Brumer's stance on the role of eyestrain in the development of myopia has been vindicated by a senior staff member of national OAA on an ABC television program, who said: "With children there is evidence to suggest that eyestrain can be the cause

of shortsightedness or actually make it worse, and if we can prevent or reduce that strain as much as possible that will definitely help with children."

It couldn't have been more plainly stated than that. It is what Mr Brumer in 1976 attempted to gain agreement to put before his colleagues at ANZAAS in 1977, and which years later he was able to present to an ANZAAS meeting in New Zealand, and it was what had earlier led to him being subjected to demands for "scientific evidence" to back up his claims, being abused by members of his profession, having his defences against allegations against him treated in a cavalier manner when considered by several hostile meetings of AOA members, ending with him being brought before what can best be described as a kangaroo court that found against him, leading to him being thrown out of his professional association for good.

His going to the media with the story caused considerable angst among his peers.

Yes, earlier on Mr Brumer was supposedly offered an opportunity to present his viewpoint in an optometrical publication, but that offer was never made to him. In any case, the deal was that he would have to have arranged for "the taking of elementary scientific precautions to exclude experimental bias", etc, etc.

He refused to do so, maintaining that had already been done in other studies, some going back to the late 19th century, and that in any case he did not have the resources (he was a sole practitioner in private practice) to undertake what was required of him.

Over the years, he stuck to his guns, not resiling one inch from his stated beliefs.

Curiously, while all of this was going on, behavioural/OEP/holistic optometry was gaining ground, without incurring the wrath of either the OAA or the VCO, with the School of Optometry and Vision Science at the University of New South Wales adding the study of at least parts of this trinity to its curriculum. The majority of optometrists in Australia are said to not subscribe to the trinity, mainly because they do not see benefits of the techniques.

Now, out of the blue, comes a report commissioned by the College of Optometrists in the United Kingdom containing the damning news that a recent, second study of behavioural optometry concludes that many of its techniques should be considered unproven until more rigorous trials are undertaken, which corresponds with a previously-published paper reporting the results of a study in 2000 that also concluded that there was a lack of controlled clinical trials to support behavioural management strategies.

The latest review, compiled by Dr Brendan Barrett, evaluated the evidence in support of behavioural approaches as it stands in 2008. Dr Barrett found that the required studies have not yet been conducted and, for this reason "the practices advocated by behavioural optometrists cannot be recommended". Clearly that is academic shorthand for the suspicions of the majority of optometrists (and ophthalmologists) that it is all mumbo jumbo, without "scientific evidence" to give it legitimacy, similar to the dubious use of expensive tinted lenses to treat dyslexia, that was all the rage in the 1960s and 1970s.

So on one hand, the beliefs of Mr Brumer seemingly cannot be tolerated, yet the trinity of behavioural/OEP/holistic optometry can be, even though its supporting evidence is thin on the ground. Where has been the demand for "scientific evidence" in regard to the trinity? There hasn't been much if any, according to Dr Barrett. Now the proponents of the trinity, including academia, will have to come up with the goods.

Were he to consider he has been victimised, Mr Brumer could be forgiven for believing that he has been, and that it's not what you know, but who you know that counts.

The whole debacle brings to mind the Dreyfus Affair, which was a political scandal that divided France from the 1890s to the early 1900s. It involved the conviction for treason in November 1894 of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a young French artillery officer. He was sentenced to life imprisonment, which he began to serve in solitary confinement on Devil's Island in French Guiana.

Two years later, in 1896, the real culprit was brought to light and identified. However, French high-level military officials dismissed or ignored this new evidence which exonerated Dreyfus. Thus, in January 1898, military judges unanimously acquitted the real culprit on the second day of his trial. Worse, French military counter-intelligence officers fabricated false documents designed to secure Dreyfus' conviction as a spy for Germany.

They were all eventually exposed, in large part due to a resounding public intervention by writer Emile Zola in January 1898. The case had to be re-opened, and Dreyfus was brought back from Guiana in 1899 to be tried again. The intense political and judicial scandal that ensued divided French society between those who supported Dreyfus (the Dreyfusards) and those who condemned him (the anti-Dreyfusards).

Eventually, all the accusations against Alfred Dreyfus were demonstrated to be baseless. Dreyfus was exonerated and reinstated as a major in the French Army in 1906. He later served during the whole of World War I, ending his service with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel.


Sound familiar? It probably does to Mr Brumer.

What would be interesting to find out is how many of Mr Brumer's opponents would have fought as hard as he has in the interest of his myopic patients, with the limited resources available to a sole practitioner.

Mr Brumer deserves readmission to the Victoria OAA; lifelong honorary membership would go some way to making amends for his treatment. But he most likely won't hold his breath waiting.



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Brumer vindicated after 32-year battle with peers over myopia

“There is evidence to suggest eye strain can be the cause of shortsight”

Victoria optometrist Maurice Brumer has been vindicated after a 32-year battle with colleagues over the causes and treatment of myopia, with Optometrists Association Australia agreeing with his claim that eyestrain can cause myopia.

Mr Brumer is unemployed and has been forced to draw unemployment benefits after being pilloried by his colleagues over the years in regard to his claims about myopia.

The vindication came when the national professional services manager of Optometrists Association Australia, Ms Shirley Loh, said on ABC television's 'Midday Show' on 7 August: “With children there is evidence to suggest that eye strain can be the cause of shortsightedness or actually make it worse, and if we can prevent or reduce that strain as much as possible that will definitely help with children.”

With those words, the arguments of Mr Brumer's opponents collapsed, particularly those of the organisers of the now-disbanded Section 7 – Optometry at the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science, the Victorian College of Optometry and Optometrists Association Australia for the past 32 years against Mr Brumer's belief that myopia can be caused by eyestrain.

In what has been one of the most scandalous episodes in optometrical history, possibly worldwide, Mr Brumer's standing up for his beliefs ended up with him being ejected from Optometrists Association Australia AA (Victoria Division) after a kangaroo court of his peers found against him.

The episode began in late 1976 when, in response to a general invitation to members of the then Australian Optometrical Association (Victoria Division), now OAA Victoria, Mr Brumer sent to the organisers a paper titled 'Eyestrain, its causes, consequences and treatment' that he wished to present at ANZAAS in 1977.

The thrust of the abstract was that eyes were designed prior to civilisation when prolonged near-seeing did not exist and they are not in 'normal' use in today's society; that prolonged near seeing is abnormal seeing; that it is that strain which 'wears out' eyes, causes blindness, nervous disorders, headaches, learning difficulties and general bodily malaise; and that conventional optometric care, totally ignoring eyestrain, seeks only the correction of visual defects.

Also, that the development of myopia is accelerated 20 times when corrected as a visual defect; the belief that myopia is inherited is a myth; decades of mounting evidence proves the validity of the eyestrain concept of myopia development; bifocal glasses for young myopes which reduce eyestrain and control the condition have been advocated for 100 years and used in Australia since 1895; and the eye-care professions have resisted change irrationally and fearfully, unwilling to admit that what has gone on before to be wrong and harmful, which is a tragedy for the public.

The abstract ended: “This paper will be an attempt to direct the future to end the disgrace of the past.”

Mr Brumer was advised by the executive of the ANZAAS organising committee that his paper, by then changed to 'The stargazer who turned scribe', appeared to be a report involving clinical observations rather than scientific content and as such did not appear to be properly placed in the scientific congress.

His abstract must contain details of his conclusions and the bases on which those had been formulated, the committee's executive said.

**The abstract ended:
“This paper will be an attempt to direct the future to end the disgrace of the past.”**

Three months later, the committee advised Mr Brumer his proposed paper had been rejected on the grounds that it was presenting theories at times radically different from those presently held by the ophthalmic professions, without any documentation of supportive clinical or experimental evidence, adding that the committee considered a public science congress was an inappropriate forum for an unsubstantiated paper of that type and that an effort should be made to find an alternative forum for his theories.

Dissatisfied, Mr Brumer took the matter into the public arena, specifically on Melbourne radio station 3AW and in *The Age* and *The Australian* newspapers. The Victoria AOA was asked to provide a spokesman, which it agreed to do, but on the morning of the interview with Mr Brumer, the AOA advised 3AW that its spokesman would not be appearing.

Mr Brumer also wrote to the then Governor-General, Sir John Kerr, who was patron of ANZAAS, however he was advised that Sir John was not able to intervene in the matter.

Questions were also asked in Federal Parliament about Mr Brumer's treatment at the hands of the ANZAAS committee, the University of Melbourne and the Victoria AOA.

In October 1977, the Victoria AOA wrote to Mr Brumer advising him that many members had complained about the radio and newspaper appearances and that its council had found his conduct and actions “injurious to the character and interests of the association.”

Also, that his statements to the media “alleged malpractice by your colleagues, and you have implied that you have superior knowledge and techniques ... such conduct and statements have achieved publicity which denigrates other members of the association and causes anxiety and concern to many of their patients.”

Furthermore, that the council “now reprimands you in the strongest terms, and you are cautioned that any continuation of this recent or similar behaviour will be further acted upon.”

In a letter in October 1978 from the then professor of optometry at the University of Melbourne, Mr Brumer was told: “the treatment concepts have been rejected [by the organising committee] because of their lack of scientific evidence”; a study he had referred to “must be rejected because it failed to take elementary scientific precautions to exclude experimental bias (the experimenter determining the amount of myopia knew which patients were in the treatment group and which were in the control group); and “the difference in myopia between the two groups is so small as to be within the measurement tolerance and is most likely due to experimenter bias”.

One of the studies Mr Brumer referred to was by Oakley and Young which found a small but statistically significant reduction in the rate of progression in myopia in a group of young patients treated with bifocal glasses when compared to a non-treatment group, however that was rejected by the professor on the above grounds.

Mr Brumer also cited findings of studies back in the late 19th century to support his views.

Some years later, Mr Brumer was permitted to present a paper at an ANZAAS meeting held in Auckland.

He was heard in silence. While he was presenting his paper, his briefcase was filled with water.

The then professor of optometry at the University of New South Wales claimed whilst in New Zealand that Mr Brumer was “the Milan Brich of optometry”.

“With children there is evidence to suggest that eye strain can be the cause of shortsightedness or actually make it worse, and if we can prevent or reduce that strain as much as possible that will definitely help with children.”

By the early 1990s, Mr Brumer had been readmitted to the AOA, however as he was addressing a meeting of members as a full member on a matter before the meeting, a gag motion was moved and passed. Mr Brumer defied the gag and kept speaking; the chairman of the meeting threatened to call the police.

Chaos reigned for some time, as Mr Brumer made it clear that he would welcome the arrival of the police. After half an hour, he was informed the police would not be called. At one stage a red-faced member, breathing heavily and up close to him, strongly criticised his behaviour.

Then followed a number of clashes with national and state AOA leaders at various meetings.

Mr Brumer's performances at those meetings led to him being summonsed to appear before the executive of the Victoria AOA in 1993. After two marathon three-hour addresses to the executive (on two different occasions), he was formally expelled from the association for a second time.

None of his defences before the executive was ever sent to association members.

In recent times, Mr Brumer has faxed members of OAA and the Victoria Optometrists Registration Board many times concerning the rejection of his papers and his continued concern about the treatment of myopia, eliciting a response by OAA that its members should buy fax machines that can filter out his faxes. Mr Brumer has now ceased sending faxes in volume.