

Kilvington, Basil (1877-1947)

Basil Kilvington (1877-1947), surgeon and medical researcher, was born 6 August 1877 at Hartlepool, Durham, England, son of Rev. James Kilvington, Wesleyan minister, and his wife Jane, née Glover. The family emigrated to Victoria in 1888. Basil was educated at Camberwell Grammar School and the University of Melbourne (M.B., 1898; B.S., 1900; M.D., 1901; M.S., 1902). He was a resident medical officer (1899) at the Melbourne Hospital and established a practice at Camberwell. On 16 March 1904 he married Lucy May Watsford at the Methodist Church, Canterbury.

While working as a demonstrator at the university, Kilvington began his study of the regeneration of nerves for which he won the David Syme research scholarship in 1908. He experimented on dogs to disprove—contemporaneously with J. N. Langley and H. K. Anderson—the claim of (Sir) Charles Ballance and (Sir) James Purves Stewart that cut distal nerves could auto-regenerate. He also showed that nerve fibre regrowth from a proximal stump bifurcated along various channels, suggested ways of reducing aberrant reconnections, established that sensory and motor nerve material was interchangeable for nerve bridging, but that autografts were much superior to allografts and xenografts, and advocated operating before healing.

In 1918 Kilvington was elected honorary surgeon to in-patients at the Melbourne Hospital; he later practised at Prince Henry's and Epworth hospitals. At the university he was a tutor at Trinity College, Stewart lecturer in surgery (1922-35) and chairman of the board of examiners in surgery. He served as president of the Melbourne Hospital Clinical Society (1920), the Victorian branch of the British Medical Association (1921), the Surgical Association of Melbourne (1926) and the surgical section of the Australasian Medical Congress, at Dunedin, New Zealand (1927). In 1926 he was one of the founders of the College of Surgeons of Australasia.

Although he mourned the loss of the 'early days' when he had ample time for research, from 1905 to 1942 Kilvington published eighteen papers on nerves (some in the *British Medical Journal*), including reports on healing a boy with Erb's palsy and relieving trigeminal neuralgia by injecting alcohol into nerves. He also wrote on hydatids, radium, cancer, decapsulation of the kidneys, prostatectomy, goitre, ulcers and orthopaedics. After becoming an honorary consulting surgeon at the Royal Melbourne Hospital in 1934, he resumed experiments on animals at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute. World War II obliged him to fill in at the R.M.H., preventing further research.

Younger colleagues remembered Kilvington's goodwill. As a surgeon he worked 'calmly and smoothly . . . skilfully and neatly', and was very quick. That he was a little casual about asepsis reflected, perhaps, his training under such pre-Listerians as Sir Thomas Fitzgerald. Kilvington was apprehensive but open-minded about nationalized medicine. A member of Melbourne Rotary from 1935, he was its president in 1942-43. He undertook historical research in Tasmania, collected stamps and pictures, and enjoyed play-readings. Kilvington maintained his famous 'puckish humour' to the end. He died of congestive cardiac failure on 28 June 1947 at Richmond and was buried in Boroondara cemetery; his wife and two sons survived him. A portrait by Paul Fitzgerald hung at the Basil Kilvington medical centre in St Kilda Road until that building's demolition and is now held by the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, Melbourne.

Kilvington's initial work—funded by the British Medical Association and the Royal Society—was published in the *British Medical Journal* in 1905-12 and is among the earliest cited in (Sir) Sydney Sunderland's *Nerves and Nerve Injuries* (1968). Sir George Syme said it was 'widely recognised as of the highest order'. Kilvington's supervisor W. A. Osborne praised his 'noble urge for research' and skill in its execution. (Sir) Albert Coates thought that Kilvington 'tended to hide his light'. None of his contemporaries went as far, however, as the British neurosurgeons M. A. Glasby and T. E. J. Hems who described him in 1993 as the 'father of peripheral nerve surgery' whose 'substantial and prophetic discoveries' were 'to nerve repair what [Nobel prize-winner Alexis] Carrel's [were] to vascular surgery'. That those discoveries were scarcely recognized suggests that they were generations ahead of the means to apply them through microsurgical techniques.

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MR. BASIL KILVINGTON