



PROFILES IN HISTORY

OAO Tribute to Dr. Irving Baker — the H. James Cobean Memorial Award

J. Mittelman*

Editor's Note: *At its 1984 Annual General Meeting, the Ontario Association of Optometrists chose to honour Dr. Irving Baker, Registrar of the College of Optometrists of Ontario. Dr. Baker is well-known to practitioners across Canada and, for this reason, the CJO is pleased to present the full text of OAO President Dr. Joseph Mittelman's tribute.*

Weeks prior to the OAO Congress ten years ago, President-elect Dr. James Cobean of North Bay was killed in a natural gas explosion. In recognition of the substantial contribution that Jim had already made, even so early in his career, and also in recognition of the high esteem in which he was held by his peers, an award was established in his name.

The Dr. H. James Cobean Memorial Award is now the highest honour which this Association may bestow upon a member of the profession in Ontario. It is given in recognition of a life-time contribution of self and service to the advancement of the profession and the science of Optometry. The list of those few who have previously received the award is sufficient testimony in itself of its significance. Previous recipients are: Dr. E.J. Fisher, Dr. Maurice Belanger, Dr. Walwyn S. Long and Dr. Emerson Woodruff.

When the history of optometry in Ontario is finally written, it will be seen that the events taking place in the fifties, sixties and seventies of this century were of great importance to the development of optometry to its present status as a mature, self-governing, primary health-care profession. To appreciate just how much was accomplished in those years, it is useful to bear in mind that in 1950, there was no College of Optometrists of Ontario; there was no Ontario Health Insurance Program (although there were an increasing number of insurance companies selling health insurance which, unfortunately for optometrists, did not cover optometric services); there was no university School of Optometry; no Doctor of Optometry degree, in fact, no degree at all; there was no Health Disciplines Act. At that time, the status of optometry in the province's Departments of Health and Education was practically zero. At that time, our profession

was, to say the most, loosely organized. Optometry had not yet put its story together and as a result, those outside optometry, particularly those in government had little dependable knowledge about us. It was a frustrating time for the Board of Examiners, for the College of Optometry and for the Ontario Association of Optometrists.

On the positive side, there was, at that time, a large influx of new graduates into the ranks. Enrollment at the College of Optometry had increased dramatically with the federal Government's education grants to war veterans. Another advantage was that members of the Association, the Board of Examiners and the College of Optometry all recognized that they were fighting the same battle for recognition and for better opportunities to fulfill what they perceived to be a proper role in the province's health care program. The cooperation among these groups was excellent. In fact, in those early rebuilding years, it was sometimes difficult to tell from those present at a meeting and from what was being discussed whether it was a school meeting, a board meeting or an association meeting. In any case, it was work, it was fun and many people gave willingly of their time and effort.

The man we are honouring this afternoon was one of those veterans, who had practiced optometry in the Canadian Army for several years and who, upon discharge, threw himself into the forefront of the reforming process.

By nature, Irving Baker is an intelligent, unflappable and hard-working person. He believes optimistically that, if you have the facts straight and work diligently, in the end things will turn out all right. And when they don't, well, he knows too how hellishly disappointing that can be. Dr. Baker is a very patient man. You can call him any time at home or at his office, provided you are prepared to talk optometry. At meetings, he always hears you out if you have something to say, for he has learned from many years of experience that good ideas often come about through the eclectic process.

When Irv was a student in the early 1940's, one of his professors informs me that he was a very conscientious student with an inquiring mind. Between second and third years during the summer, Irving was busy examining army recruits in the

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morning and off to class in the afternoon. Upon discharge from the army, he entered optometry and proceeded to participate in our reformation. He was a practitioner, educator and politician. Through the years, Irving Baker has never given less than his best to the advancement of optometry, often at great personal sacrifice. He was the first to study in optometry the basic principles of professionalism and professional organization. Many of those basics are so well-established in optometry today because of him. When he was President of O.A.O., he appealed continually to the membership to change their manner of billing patients from the single mark-up system to one of listing material costs and professional fees, a principle solidly entrenched in our legislation today.

The activities of the 1960's were crucial to Optometry in Ontario and Irving Baker played significant roles in our professional development: our response and submission to the Royal Commission on Health (our first real study of our position in the health-care society), the Committee of the Healing Arts, and the intense political negotiations to transfer the College to the University of Waterloo.

Without his knowledge of the law, his sense of fairness in negotiating, his vigilance and care in dealing with the Ministry of Health, our progressive improvements in provincial legislation may not have come as quickly as they did. In this respect, perhaps Irving's crowning achievement came with the successful inclusion of Optometry in the passing of the Ontario Health Disciplines Act, 1974.

When we look back on those days, we can better recognize how important was the role played by Irving. He was O.A.O. President, a member of the Board of Examiners, clinic director and teacher. Although many were involved in the development of the profession, each with an area of expertise, it was Irving Baker who put it all together. He was the contact man and our chief negotiator, the man who led our professional delegations with government. Over time, Irving Baker has become well known and respected with the Ministry of Health and today, he is the senior Registrar among the health-care professions in Ontario.

I have gotten to know Irving Baker a little better over the past few years. I, and others, know he has strongly-held views and positions developed from intense and logical thought, eager to test on anyone who will listen. He has tremendous insight into human behaviour and this has proven to be of great benefit in helping people with problems, decisions and responsibilities. He is a most compassionate man.

Although I have only seen Irving in his professional career, I am told that he is both a dedicated and loving husband and father. They say that behind a successful man is an equally important

wife. Helen Baker has stood by her man and has been a most important asset to Irving.

Irving Baker has endured, over the many years, considerable criticism, some earned and some unearned. Our recognition of Irving Baker is long overdue. Today we honour this man, Irving Baker, with the Cobean Award.

Postscript:

I wish to acknowledge the valuable contributions of information from Drs. Belanger, Bobier, Fisher and Hawkins in the presentation of this award.

Dr. J. Mittelman

Following is the text of a tribute paid by Dr. Irving Baker, Registrar of the College of Optometrists of Ontario, speaking on behalf of all Ontario optometrists, to Win Atkinson, the College's long-time Administrative Assistant. The presentation was made at the 1984 Annual General Meeting of the Ontario Association of Optometrists.

I am honoured to introduce at this time to receive an honorary membership in the Ontario Association of Optometrists a person who, in her own right, is unique; a person who least likely suspects that her devotion and contribution to optometry is about to be acknowledged in this way.

Let me describe this person to you. This is a person everyone knows but few have had the good fortune to work with directly. This is a person whose presence has been felt by many. I am talking about a person who is quiet but determined, efficient but never cold, influential but never aggressive, and a person who is so dependable that there is in her mind seldom a thought that a task will not be completed.

This is a person who has been an integral part of Ontario optometry for almost two decades. She has influenced students and now looks after the welfare of some of our leaders.

This person happened upon the optometry scene some nineteen years ago in order to earn enough money to buy a bus ticket to go back to Muskoka. Well, either she learned to like us, or we her, or maybe the College never did pay her enough that she could buy that ticket.

Whatever the reason, we in optometry have all benefitted by her presence, her loyalty and her humanity. She has set a standard of excellence and devotion which is likely never to be equalled, let alone surpassed.

It is with deep personal affection and with a most sincere "thank you" from me to her that I present to this gathering the Administrative Assistant of the College of Optometrists of Ontario, Win Atkinson.

I now call on Dr. Mittelman, President of the Ontario Association of Optometrists, to present Win with her Honourary Membership in the Association.