

A CJO Interview:

Edward B. Higgins,

the first full-time Director of the

Canadian Association of

Optometrists

Editor's Introduction

In 1975, the Canadian Association of Optometrists' Council granted an Honorary Life Membership in the Association to E.B. Higgins.

In 1985, the Council of CAO again recognized the outstanding contributions of Ed Higgins and awarded him a specially struck plaque in commemoration and appreciation.

The plaque was originally intended for presentation at CAO's 1985 Biennial Congress in Regina. Ed, however, was unable to attend and so Council authorized Dr. G.M. Belanger, CJO Editor and long-time friend of Ed Higgins, to present it at a gathering which took place at the Higgins home late last year. Also present for the occasion were Dr. Irving Baker, Registrar of the College of Optometrists of Ontario, Mrs. Helen Baker, Mrs. Françoise Belanger and Dr. Ron Macpherson, who was President of CAO from 1971-1973.

In making the presentation of the plaque to Mr. Higgins, Dr. Macpherson alluded to his long and distinguished contribution to the growth of the profession in Canada.

In 1975, the Canadian Association of Optometrists' Council granted an Honorary Life Membership in the Association to E.B. Higgins.

"I recall those years," he said, "when you travelled thousands of miles, addressing provincial Associations and local Societies, collecting information, analysing it and finally preparing the necessary drafts for presentation to the federal government and various interprofessional committees. Many in the profession wondered from where you derived your tireless energy and your patience. I remember seeing you look perplexed, and occasionally anxious, but never despairing. Those of us who were close to you soon realized that you considered your work a dedication more than a job. We also observed that your wife, Dorothy, was a strong and inspiring ally in the cause you so skilfully espoused."

That Optometry today is covered

by the Health Insurance programs in nine Canadian provinces, that Government recognizes and accepts without question the profession's position in the primary health care field in Canada, that new graduates are able to enter one of the most respected professions in this country, is due to the contribution of this one man. The Higgins interview, which begins in this issue, has already spawned several supplementary written commentaries by the likes of Harold Coape-Arnold, Austin Forsyth and Colonel Jim Duffey, role-players all in the formative stages of the profession. Much of this material is being assembled for presentation in future issues of the Journal.

It is with a great deal of pride and appreciation that the CJO begins this story. The 100-page Higgins Report, which was the accumulation of the data obtained on the cross-country trek alluded to above by Dr. Macpherson, should be mandatory reading for optometrists in Canada.

Here then is Part 1 of the CJO interview with Ed Higgins.



L-R: Dr. Maurice Bélanger, Mme. Françoise Bélanger, Dr. Ron Macpherson, Ed Higgins, Mrs. Helen Baker, Dr. Irving Baker

Ed Higgins was born March 11, 1911 in Transcona, a suburb of Winnipeg. His mother was on the Faculty of the Teacher's College in London, Ontario. His father owned and operated a hardware store in Transcona which he sold in 1919 before moving to Toronto to join Great West Life as an administrative representative.

Ed's early schooling took place in Toronto and he was graduated from Grade Thirteen at Central Collegiate, the same central technical school where Optometry began in Ontario.

Registering initially in Business Administration at the University of Western Ontario, he transferred after two years to Dalhousie University, coincident with his father's appointment as provincial Manager for Great West Life in Nova Scotia.

Ed completed his undergraduate degree in Business and went on to obtain his M.A. in Economics and Political Science. He returned to Toronto and worked for Canada

Packers for four years, enrolling in their in-house Executive Training Course.

He enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force and obtained his pilot's wings, achieving the rank of Captain upon his discharge. Back in civilian life, he joined an advertising agency and, five years later, he was invited by one of his own major clients to join them as full-time Associate Managing Director. The firm, in fact, became E.B. Higgins Management Consultants later on.

As a professional consultant, Ed served a total of 34 different trade and professional Associations for over twenty years, among them the (then) Toronto-based Canadian Association of Optometrists.

In 1966, Ed was appointed as Officer Brother of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem.

After severing his connections with CAO in the late 1960's, he also sold his interest in the firm to his partners and joined the Faculty at Lakehead Community College in Thunder Bay (now Lakehead University) as an instructor in Business Administration,

Human Relations and Public Relations.

Sadly, two subsequent heart attacks forced a resignation from the faculty and he retired to Trenton, Ontario where he now is under the care of the Hallowell Nursing Home staff. His health, however, is improving once again and Ed spends several days every two weeks at home with his wife, Dorothy.

Always willing to welcome visitors or correspond with professional colleagues, Ed can be reached at 199 Henry Street, Trenton, Ontario, K8V 3V1. Telephone (613) 394-2946.

(In the interview that follows, "CJO" is Dr. Maurice Belanger, Editor in Chief; "EBH" is, of course, Ed Higgins. Occasional comments were also provided by Drs. Irving Baker and Ron Macpherson and, when this occurs, they are introduced by their respective initials.)

CJO: Ed, can you recall the very first contact you had with official Optometry?

EBH: It was in 1949 or 1950 that Dr. Fred Attridge, who happened to be our family optometrist, discussed some of Optometry's professional



L-R: Ed and Dorothy Higgins

problems with me and informed me that the Ontario Association of Optometrists was seeking a Public Relations Counsellor to direct and plan a PR Program the Association was projecting. Previous programs had been directed by optometrists, members of the Ontario Council, among whom Drs. Doug Pearsall and Bob Thomson were major motivators.

Dr. Attridge, by the way, is a former Ontario President and was thoroughly familiar with the activities of the OAO. He introduced me to Irving (Baker), who had just been elected to the Presidency of the provincial Association. Soon after, it was arranged that I would also be introduced to the Council of the OAO at one of its monthly meetings and I was hired the following meeting.

CJO: Do you recall your initial impressions of the profession after your hiring as OAO PR Counsellor?

EBH: Oh, yes. Quite well, in fact. I was introduced to a group of professional people who had high ideals, but who had no idea of the manner in which they would achieve those ideals. They seemed to lack self-confidence and I recall that even their attitudes and personal appearance seemed to contribute to these impressions.

They seemed insecure and, to some degree, lacked an esprit de corps necessary to pull together to meet a common goal.

You have to realize that, at that

time, optometrists considered themselves as competitors with each other, rather than as colleagues. Fees in those days varied from free examinations to (what were then) very significant fees of \$10.00 to \$15.00.

I had to become familiar with the profession inside and out — its history and the attitudes of its members.

To make matters worse, the appearance of medically sponsored prepaid health plans did nothing to reduce the profession's insecurity or to raise its self-confidence.

So as a management consultant, I felt I could be of great service to Optometry in Ontario, if I could direct the members towards a better professional co-operation, increased self-confidence and faith in the future.

But in order to do the best job possible, I had to become familiar with the profession inside and out — its history and the attitudes of its members.

In the early days of my association with Optometry, I found it to be a real period of growth as far as I personally was concerned. It was a new field of interest and a new challenge to learn, in effect, a new language and to

discover the importance of the role played by Optometry in rendering vision care to the people of Canada. Out of this report I researched came contacts with a number of different "publics" at both the national and provincial levels, since they represent in many cases a duplication of the acceptance factor of your profession.

Certainly, it was a learning period from the very first year of my association with the Ontario group. OAO work gave me, too, a deeper understanding of the range of problems the profession faced at the national level. This involved not only the question of optometrists being observers through hospitals, through the Junior Red Cross, through the Workmen's Compensation Board, but it involved, even then, the relationships which were being considered and sought with other professions, including ophthalmology. It was obvious to me as well that, in any work, I would relate as an external observer to the College of Optometry, to its training and its programs. This was the beginning of my education into your profession in *all* its areas of public interest.

CJO: You helped prepare a number of Briefs during your term of service with the OAO. Could you recall some of them and their importance at that time?

EBH: Their "importance" was of course, a relative thing. To the Council

of the Ontario Association of Optometrists, they were quite significant. The kind of follow-up work that was done with them was really the job of the members of the OAO and their Secretary, O.J. Wycock. There was some progress made, but it was more an overall exercise designed to get the name "Optometry" in front of certain government bodies and so be seen in a more favourable, or at least a more prominent, light.

I can recall some. The Ontario Workmen's Compensation Board was petitioned successfully to accept and pay optometrists for services and repairs to eyeglasses broken or damaged in work situations.

Irving, meanwhile, was approaching the Bell Telephone Company, Dr. Cruikshank the Chief Medical Officer in particular, to accept the OAO's recommended safety plan for Bell employees in which practitioners carried out all services, including dispensing. The practitioner billed Bell for services and cost of material, supplying copies of merchandise invoices. Fees were a matter of agreement between the OAO and Bell.

There were also discussions ongoing with the Junior Red Cross prior to the setting up of a mobile van to screen for vision defects in children. Dr. Norm Roach, now in Fredericton, was the first optometrist to operate the van. Dr. George Woo, who is now on faculty at Waterloo, was second.

After that, however, I am not sure if the project was abandoned or continued by others.

I was also involved in discussions with CNIB, which never seemed to get anywhere despite the presence of some lay Directors on the Board who were favourable to Optometry.

And of course, I spent a lot of time on the telephone, counselling practitioners from all over the province on how to handle discrimination by school nurses, medical officers of health, school boards and even industrial safety officers.

Irving, when he was President, used me regularly as a sounding board whenever he had ideas, particularly before heading into OAO Council meetings. We both found that this provided a good basis for discussion and gave him a handle to guide the topics as they came up during the meetings.

CJO: How did you first become involved with the national Association?

EBH: In 1951, the Canadian Association of Optometrists held its second Biennial Congress in Winnipeg. Already, there was talk of a national health plan of one form or another for Canada. The Haggerty Commission Report had been published and it consisted mainly of reporting the operation of health plans across the world, particularly in Sweden, as potential foundation material for implementing a national program in this country.

CAO Council had elected Harry S. Nowlan as President and one of his first actions was to suggest an enquiry into the status of Optometry in Canada so that we could be better prepared to face the unknown developments which a national health plan in Canada would bring.

I recall that it was actually the suggestion of Irving Baker, then Ontario President, to CAO Council that I would be a good person to undertake such an enquiry because of the broad experience I had had working for the Ontario Association.

So CAO Council, after some deliberation, accepted Irving's suggestion and I was hired and given "carte blanche" to plan and carry out the trans Canada tour of enquiry.

It proved to be quite a challenge in more ways than one. CAO Council affirmed their view of the importance of the task and actually voted most of its very small reserve to pay my salary or fees.

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CJO: Can you give us some insight into how you planned a trip of that magnitude and how you prepared the survey questions you would have to ask?

EBH: I sat down with our management staff at the consulting firm and realized very quickly that only an accurate and complete analysis of the profession would permit us to arrive at valid recommendations for a plan of action. We felt that we would have to do three things:

- (i) find out where Optometry has been as a profession.
- (ii) determine its present status in the opinions of the various publics with whom the Association dealt either individually or as an organized group.
- (iii) determine the major problems which existed and the plans that could be made to resolve them.

After becoming familiar with the main historical aspects of the optical profession worldwide, and in Canada and the US more specifically, it became evident to me that our enquiry would depend more on obtaining information from practitioners all across the country than on the formal research into legal documents from optometric archives.

This meant that, in planning my tour, it was essential that I meet with as many groups and individuals as possible in each province. That year, I got tremendous cooperation from the Western provinces, who actually set the dates for their respective annual meetings a few days apart so that I could begin my tour in BC and work eastward to Manitoba. This particular sequence was imposed by the restricted finances made available. Quebec and Ontario did not present any travel problems and the success of the sequential visit to the West led to a similar schedule's being planned in Atlantic Canada.

CJO: Do you recall any misgivings or anxieties crossing your mind as you began your cross-Canada visit?

EBH: None at all. We had done our planning. As a matter of fact, it was just another research project, albeit a massive one as far as I was concerned. But the mechanics were essentially the same. What I did, as I did with other plans, was to find out (a) what the present situation was, (b) what the history of the problems were and (c) what would be the best things to recommend for future action. It was, however, a real training challenge and I acknowledge now with considerable gratitude the assistance I received from all Councils and the hundreds of optometrists across Canada in conducting the survey.

It was a real pleasure to work on this project and to be able to add a bit of knowledge to the CAO Council and the profession based on what I had

found, plus use my university training as an economist and a political scientist. It probably was my greatest single consulting experience in terms of seeing a young profession open its eyes more clearly to its basic problems and display its willingness to step up its activities in those areas of importance.

It was the sense of unlimited co-operation that gave me the greatest pleasure. Nobody held back, everybody reported frankly and I believe that, as a result, the so-called "Higgins Report" still stands as a major valid study of a profession in the course of rapid development.

CJO: Have you any unofficial experiences or impressions to recount that may not be included in your report?

EBH: No, not particularly. There were certain confidential aspects which I could not, in all faith, include in my report but, basically, you will find (on page 100 of the report) that I was fairly specific about what you were experiencing from coast to coast with different intensities and different problems.

As an example, if you want one, in New Brunswick, they have very good relationships with the various optical supply houses, something which is not true in many other parts of Canada. Indeed, I note from various studies which we have made that, the further out west and the further down east we go, these relationships seem to improve. This, we are assuming, is in the hands of the optometrists and their local Councils.

CJO: During your cross-Canada tour, you met literally hundreds of optometrists either individually or in groups. Do certain individuals stand out?

EBH: Yes, I visited with every Canadian optometrical Council and, many other times, with more localized group meetings of optometrists as an external observer. I was constantly amazed at the evidence I encountered of progress the provinces had made in terms of continuing or upgrading the education of their members by annual, semi-annual or even quarterly seminars. This was particularly true in the Western provinces, where a strong effort was constantly being made in this field. In Saskatchewan particularly, attendance at these educational seminars ran very high and this was probably the most encouraging aspect

I found in the optometric group as a whole.

I was interested also in those provinces which were faced to a more or less greater extent with the problem of optometrists in practices that were more commercial in aspects than would probably have been expected of a professional group. This is a problem that has yet to be solved, in fact. I have feelings, however, that optometrists do those things they know must be done if they are not only to survive but to enhance their acceptance as a member of the health care profession. This I know they will do but what we must find are the tools, techniques and ideas which will motivate them as carefully as possible towards the future of their profession.

As to individuals, well, several come to mind immediately, but I am sure I will miss a number of others and I hope that those I omit will not be offended or angry with me. Harold Coape-Arnold was CAO President during the years we wrote the Brief to the Royal Commission on Health Services, better known as the Hall Commission. He was the man of the hour with his grasp of the socio-economic effects of a national health plan on the public and on the professions. Although he felt the professions should be free enterprises, he did not shirk his duty as President and worked diligently to place Optometry's position in the best possible light so that if a national plan were instituted, Optometry would be included as a participating discipline.

We evolved a pattern of relationships that was intense, but surprisingly never personal considering the depth and extent of the programs on which we worked together.

Austin Forsyth was another diligent worker behind the scenes, never seeking the limelight but always working, as did his father, to advance Optometry. You tell me he has retired, but something else tells me hardly retired. He's just not that kind of man.

I know, for example, that in his "retirement", he set up the structure and terms of reference for what is now the office of the Executive Director of the Saskatchewan Association of Optometrists.

And I recall Manny Finkleman of Winnipeg. Who could ever forget this humorous man, a great storyteller, an astute diplomat, top class organizer and always the best dressed man in town?

Cliff Palmer of Lethbridge had already terminated his Presidency at the time I got involved with the survey, but certainly his administrative abilities carried on with his successor.

Harry Perrin of Vancouver is another of the old guard who did much more in pushing the need of a national optometric organization than he is given credit for.

John Mulrooney of Halifax finished his term as President, and then became Secretary-Treasurer for nine years, nine difficult years, but he kept us afloat. He served CAO for 15 years, the longest term on Council of any CAO delegate. He was the first recipient of the President's Award, which I for one felt was a most fitting tribute to his years of work and service.

Fred Mignot, former Director of the Montreal School, was the first Quebec delegate to CAO and an indefatigable worker for the Association as he realized too many problems existed at the national level to be tackled by provincial Associations alone and independently. A national federation, he recognized, was essential for progress.

Then there was Eli Boyaner from Saint John, a quiet man but with a keen mind, and never fearful of speaking out if the circumstances demanded it.

IB: Yes, I remember that Eli was Chief Scout for Canada for several years and his study was full of Boy Scout paraphernalia, pictures with the Queen and other dignitaries. He was a man of the world. He could discuss almost any topic, not only Optometry and the Boy Scout movement.

CJO: Ed, can you recall some of the difficulties you had in setting up the first CAO office. For instance, how was it managed? How was it first organized and how eventually did you come to organize it into something that has existed to this day?

EBH: I was hired in the early summer of 1953. It was agreed that I would receive a retainer fee for my services. Office work would be handled by my staff and CAO would be charged for this administrative work as well. My office was at 19 Richmond West at that date. Eventually, we moved to 32 Front Street and then, later to a Bay Street address.

As consultants, we were supposed to

act as Counsel to the CAO. I felt that it would be best if the operation were directed from my own personal management company in order that I might keep a very tight rein on the areas of problems and attempt to view them with objectivity, but from a very close range. From that sprang, of course, a very deep relationship which took me to the position of Managing Director of the CAO on a half time basis.

Then, of course, I accepted the responsibility for working more intensely on the problems, and with the various publics, as had been outlined in my report. There were a number of areas that were all given minor (and some, major) attention. All, in fact, at one time or another were discussed by the CAO Council during my term of eleven years with the national Association.

It was obvious, of course, as we developed (and as I recommended in my report; this was one of the findings of my survey, in fact) that you should have your own national office with your own full-time Managing Director, if you can afford it. This you subsequently did and, while I have remained very interested in Optometry to this day, I have only a scant knowledge of what has actually happened in the profession since 1967.

But, to answer the question, it was not difficult to get the administrative office organized. I gave CAO half of my regular work week, i.e. 5 half days. When attending provincial meetings, my expenses were paid (but not my time, as this was considered part of those half days).

Being in Toronto, I had the opportunity to talk with the faculty at the School (located in Toronto until moving to the University of Waterloo in 1967), Irving, Fred, Mel Katzman (the CJO Business Manager), Maurice as CJO Editor, not to mention most of Toronto's optometrists and the members of the OAO Council with whom I continued to work. All those were my mentors and teachers and contributed greatly to my continued education in Optometry.

CJO: In those early years, as you've already mentioned, finances were very restricted. Can you give us some further insight into this aspect?

EBH: Optometry at that time was very disorganized in a national sense.

Leaders in each province were aware of the problems but the rank and file members basically had to be educated, and then convinced. Attitudes were very provincial and the yardstick to determine priorities was what each individual optometrist had to pay to his or her own provincial group.

For example, Ontario was the only province where membership in the provincial Association was voluntary and some 20 percent were opted out then. An Ontario optometrist's only mandatory fee was a licence fee, but it went to finance the College on St. George. All other provincial Associations' licence and Association fees were mandatory and could be fixed.

The Western and Maritime provinces, with their much smaller numbers, were contributing a far greater percentage or amount per capita than either Ontario or Quebec. (It should be mentioned that, in arriving at provincial contributions, the CAO Council would set up a budget and then ask each province to contribute a fair amount. Ontario and Quebec contributed only lump sums, not a dues payment based on a per capita basis as did the other provinces.)

CJO: But in those lean first years, was any attempt made to get funds from sources other than Association contributions and fees?

EBH: Oh yes, we tried to set up a plan in which the optical supply houses would contribute a certain percentage, say two or three percent from each practitioner's lab bill on frames and lenses only.

But this required the co-operation of the various firms and approval of all practitioners to be successful. It really never got off the ground because of the resistance not only from parts of the industry but also from some of our own practitioners. Approaching the optical firms was not difficult, but there was hesitation on their part to act as a collection agency for optometry.

We investigated the proposal and had decided there was nothing wrong with the basic idea but it did not seem to be fully workable and was eventually abandoned.

CJO: Have you any recollections as to how your meagre finances were handled?

EBH: For the first years, meetings were held in different cities along with the Biennial Congresses and, in the off years, in those cities which would keep travel expenses of the delegates to the minimum. Costs would be totalled up and divided evenly among the provincial Associations over and above their annual payments.

Even the hotels were chosen so as to reduce costs. Which is not to say that we went to 5th class hotels or anything, but rather to those within our finances. Social life during these meetings was at a minimum and often we would be invited to a delegate's home. I can recall having the Council at my home for dinner on several occasions when we met in Toronto. Irving and Helen also played host to Council.



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