This Royal College was founded on 5 February, 1927. The name “Royal Australasian College of Surgeons,” dates from 1931. Between 1927 and 1930, the College was known as the “College of Surgeons of Australasia”. Permission to use the word “Royal” was granted in 1930 by Royal Assent. The inscription on our mace is “Royal College of Surgeons of Australasia.”

Each year, at the time of the Annual Scientific Congress, we parade the names of Syme, Devine, Barnett, Hamilton Russell and others. These names belong to some of the founding fathers of our College. Today, we have inherited a rich legacy of their yeoman and seminal tasks which have shaped this College. But for the foresight, perspicacity and perseverance of this group of brilliant surgeons in New Zealand and in Australia, this College would not be one of the major surgical institutions of the world today.

In the early part of the last century, the structure and management of almost all the medical organisations of both Countries were under the guidance of the British Medical Association (BMA). However, the surgeons were agitating for a change. It is remarkable that this groundswell of opinion would permeate throughout the surgical fraternity of both Australia and New Zealand at the same time. The combined population of our nations was eight million.

In 1920, the Professor Louis Barnett of Surgery at the University of Otago in Dunedin gave the first indication that a number of surgeons wished to form a body distinct from other practitioners. His initial move was to propose the formation of a New Zealand Association of Surgeons. He also had a concurrent proposal for an Australasian surgical association

In autumn that year, members of the surgical staff of the Melbourne, Alfred and St Vincent’s Hospitals in Melbourne, after a number of preliminary meetings, formed the Surgical Association of Melbourne. Membership was open to only the senior surgical staff of these hospitals, and limited to 50. It was independent of the BMA. This was a “closed shop,” and its proceedings were not reported to any one. The first president was Frederic D Bird of the Melbourne Hospital, and the vice-presidents were Hamilton Russell of the Alfred and George Syme of the Melbourne. When a few Victorian country surgeons were admitted as members, it became known as the Victorian Association of Surgeons (VAS). Across the Tasman, New Zealand Surgeons who were disenchanted with their BMA supported the formation of such a surgical body. It quickly spawned similar committees in other centres.
The VAS met with strong opposition from the monolithic BMA which demanded that all members of the VAS had to be members of the BMA. The threat of the BMA was ignored, and the VAS quietly went about its business.

The Eleventh Australasian Medical Congress was held in Brisbane the same year. As Barnet could not get to the meeting, Hamilton Russell moved a resolution to give effect to Barnett’s proposal of an Australasian Surgical Association. Hamilton Russell’s words were: “…the time has arrived for considering the desirability of forming an Australasian Surgical Association with the objective of raising the standard of surgery in Australia…” Gordon Craig of the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital (RPAH) in Sydney made an amendment. He would have liked a section of surgery in every branch of the BMA in Australia and in New Zealand instead of a separate body of surgeons. Barnett’s proposal was defeated because it sounded too much like the VAS “closed shop.” Craig’s amendment was well received because every BMA member could also go to meetings of the surgical section. Neither proposal was passed. However, New South Wales went on its own way, and for a few years, was the only State Branch of the BMA that had a Section of Surgery.

Within the Congress at that time, there was no indication of disloyalty of the Surgical Section to the BMA because nearly all the members of the surgical fraternity in Australia and New Zealand were at the same time members of the BMA, and a good number of them were either members of the federal committee or office bearers of the state committees. George Syme, like Craig, was also opposed to Barnett’s idea at first. So strong was the pro-BMA lobby that Sir Henry Newland of the Royal Adelaide Hospital, who was to become the second President of the College, said ‘The formation of a new association would be a dagger in the heart of the BMA’.

1924 was the year that William Mayo and Franklin Martin visited Melbourne. They were major players in the founding of the American College of Surgeons in 1913. During the visit, Martin lauded the success of the American College, and the seeds of a possible Australasian College of Surgeons were sown. Afterwards, they invited eight Australian and New Zealand surgeons to attend the Annual Meeting of the American College of 1925. Four members of this delegation were conferred honorary American Fellowships. While in America, Hugh Devine of St Vincent’s, Melbourne, went on a cruise in William Mayo’s houseboat down the Mississippi. During this cruise, Mayo had said to Devine, ‘My boy, go home and found your own College and make it fit into your own Australasian conditions and circumstances’. Devine returned to Melbourne fired with the enthusiasm to found a ‘College of Surgeons’ worthy of the high ideals he embraced. He was an eloquent man, and many colleagues, including George Syme, fell under his persuasion. The importance of Syme could not be underestimated. He had just retired, and he was the doyen of surgery at that time. He commanded enormous respect from all and sundry, including the surgeons of New South Wales and New Zealand. Above all, the BMA trusted Syme.
The intense pressure on the VAS from the BMA was such that in 1925, it capitulated to become the Surgical Section of the Victorian BMA. The BMA had thought that this winding up signaled the defeat of the surgeons. They were wrong. On 19 November, Professor Francis P Sandes of RPAH, Surgery, composed the now famous ‘Foundation Letter’ which was sent to all the senior surgeons and the surgeons of the public hospitals in Australia and New Zealand. It was signed by Victorian surgeons George Syme, Hamilton Russell and Hugh Devine. The opening sentences of this letter are as follows:

Senior Surgeons and Surgical Specialists in all States of Australia have noticed with much concern, a growing disregard by younger practitioners of recognized ethics in Surgical Practice, combined with a spirit of commercialism tending to degrade the high tradition of the surgical profession. Difficult and dangerous surgical operations are undertaken by practitioners who have not been properly trained in surgical principles and practice, and who divide fees with colleagues who refer the patients to them.

This ‘Exordium’ was a call to arms for all surgeons on both sides of the Tasman, and the sentiments expressed were highly relevant. Eighty-one surgeons responded. They were to become the Foundation Fellows of the College.
The following year, 1926, must have been a very busy one for these Fellows. New Zealand had decided officially to join Australia in this venture. Among the tasks ahead was the writing of the constitution and the problem regarding finance. There was the threat of being sued by those members of the BMA who had no higher surgical qualification but who wished to join this renegade body, which officially was not part of the BMA. This was of major concern because there was no examination for admission to membership at that time. The lack of an entry examination might also have been the reason that some of the senior surgeons favoured the model of the American College, and others were impressed by the emphasis of the American College on the practical issues of operative surgery and the raising of the standard of surgical care in hospitals (Mayo and Martin were referring to hospitals in America). In addition, they had to decide where would the headquarters be situated and what would be the name of this new body of surgeons.

On 8 August, 1926, after much deliberation, Sandes wrote to Devine, informing him of the general feeling of the Sydney surgeons that a change in the surgical establishment in New Zealand and in Australia was imminent, and thus giving the Melbourne group full support in their efforts to create this new College. A number of important meetings took place in New Zealand, Sydney and Melbourne between April and August. Some of the grounds which were covered included:

1. The terms “Guild” and “Society” were considered but were rejected.
2. A proposal for “voluntary incorporation” of individuals was not considered because it would lack the authority of an organization.
3. A senior surgical degree might be accomplished through the proposed University of Canberra, and that the degree would be given *ad eundum gradum*. This proposal was put forward so as to avoid the need for a College. It was also rejected.
4. While the Melbourne surgeons had used the term “Association,” the Sydney surgeons, led by Gordon Craig, favoured the term “College;” hence, the proposal “Australasian College of Surgeons.” The word “College” was interpreted in the sense of the Latin “Collegium” as a number of persons who could deliberate together.
5. The new Australasian body of surgeons would not be an appendage of the BMA, the Royal College of Surgeons of England or the American College of Surgeons.
6. The name “The College of Surgeons of Australasia” was introduced and was written into the minutes of a meeting on 1 June, 1926. In addition, the minutes of a meeting in August that year stated: “That members of the College be designated as Fellows and be entitled to place after their names the letters “FCSA” be:

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| A | Australasia, which includes New Zealand."

These words were carefully chosen so that they would not be confused with ‘FACS’.
There was another significant meeting of the nucleus of this fledgling surgical body in Sydney on the 25th and 26th August, 1926. Devine and others from Melbourne joined this meeting. The ‘federal’ nature of the representation of New Zealand and the various States was formalized. There were to be forty “Founders of the College” made up as follows:

- New Zealand: 6
- New South Wales: 10
- Victoria: 10
- South Australia: 5
- Queensland: 5
- Western Australia: 2
- Tasmania: 2

The details of the “Founders can be found in a publication by the College “The Founders of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons” edited by Sir Patrick Kenny of St Vincent’s Hospital, Sydney. These “Founders” are not to be confused with the “Foundation Fellows”. The ‘Exordium’ drafted by Sandes was signed by the ‘Founders’. It is printed on parchment paper. The whole document can be found in Wyn Beasley’s book The Mantle of Surgery. This information is also available on the College website

We come now to another BMA meeting of the Australasian Medical Congress held in Dunedin, on the 5th February, 1927. It was here that the ‘College of Surgeons of Australasia’ was officially formed. Ten of the Founders - Syme, Barnett, Worrall, Newland, Craig, Russell, Robertson, Sandes, Kenny and Devine - were elected to the Council and Sir George Syme was elected President, with L E Barnett and A MacCormick as Vice Presidents. The newly elected Council also met for the first time on that day.

The next item to consider was the Letters Patent and the Coat of Arms. The Letters Patent recording the College Coat of Arms were granted to the “College of Surgeons of Australasia” on 30 January, 1931, following a petition by (Sir) Hugh Devine to the College of Arms in London. Although the prefix ‘Royal’ was granted on 23 December 1930 by King George V, it was too late for the craftsmen who were making the mace to alter the inscription already carved thereon. The excellent paper by Wyn Beasley tells the events that our mace, given to us by the English College, has the inscription: The Royal College of Surgeons of Australasia.

In his presidential address at the Fourth Annual Meeting of the College in March, 1931, it was Sir Henry Newland who announced the new name “Royal Australasian College of Surgeons.” The announcement had to have Royal Assent. This event is quoted in the minutes of a Council Meeting which took place on 30 March, 1931:

*Acting upon the authority confirmed by the Council at its meeting held in Sydney, the 7th September, 1929, the Executive Committee forwarded an application to His Majesty the King, through His Excellency the Governor-
General of the Commonwealth of Australia, and His Excellency the Governor-General of the Dominion of New Zealand, for inclusion of the prefix ‘Royal’ for the title of the College. The Executive Committee has been informed by the Secretary to the Right Honorable the Prime Minister of Australia, that His Majesty was greatly pleased to grant this application. Fellows were therefore be asked for approval of a resolution that the title of the College should be altered from the ‘College of Surgeons of Australasia’ to the ‘Royal Australasian College of Surgeons’.

Still to come was another twist to the saga. Because the College is a Company registered in Victoria, the name change under the Act of 1928 required evidence that the RACS really was the CSA to which the original grant of the word ‘Royal’ was made.

In another minutes of Council dated 29 September 1931, the entry stated that ‘The Governor-in-Council’ approved of the change of name of the College to Royal Australasian College of Surgeons’ - the 26 May, 1931. Our present name was therefore ratified in September, 1931.
This is the account of the events leading to the founding of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons. Reference had been made to the tasks of our forebears which have shaped our College. If one were to examine the correspondence and the minutes of the early meetings of the College, the one passion that pervaded those senior colleagues was ‘to improve the standard of surgery’. The ‘Exordium’ of November, 1925 signed by our Founders embodied the nobility and the objective of the responsibility of surgeons to society. The surgeons of today and the succeeding generations must sustain the continuity and the growth of these ideals.

“If the mantle of Surgery which we hand on to succeeding generations is to be of Cloth of Gold, may the Surgeons of this hospital weave into it many threads of precious metal, free from dross.”

F P Sandes (1876-1945)
ACKNOWLEDGMENT
Credit must be given to Elizabeth Milford to the Archives Office for researching into the Council Minutes and photographs of past events of the College. We are grateful to former employees, Catherine Green and Maria Drossos who contributed much relevant material for the article. Geoff Down, the Curator of the College, gave valuable advice regarding the names of some of the Founders and information about the College mace. Above all, Wyn Beasley gave tremendous help in the preparation of this paper. We have to thank Mrs Rosie Low for typewriting the manuscript.

FURTHER READINGS

ARTICLES
Beasley, A.W. An Early History of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, College website (2001)

EXTRACTS FROM THE MEDICAL JOURNAL OF AUSTRALIA
February 21, 1925, pp. 191-192, Editorial: “The Control of Surgeons”

EXTRACTS FROM MINUTES OF COUNCIL
RACS Archive Series 104 SB 103
“Minutes of the Committee appointed to consider the question of the formation of an Australasian College of Surgeons,” June, 1, 1926
- resolution that the name shall be “College of Surgeons of Australasia”
RACS Archive Series 7 Meeting of Delegates to the College of Surgeons of Australasia (Australasia includes New Zealand), August 25-26, 1926
- resolution that members of the College be designated as Fellows with the suffix FCSA: Fellow of the College of Surgeons of Australasia
RACS Archive Series 7: First Meeting of the Founders of the College,
February 5, 1927

ELECTRONIC REFERENCE
www.surgeons.org/Content/NavigationMenu/WhoWeAre/HistoricalArchives/History