

Sir Benjamin Keith Rank (1911–2002): A Founding Father and Ambassador of Plastic Surgery

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Fortunately for its survival, plastic surgery does not depend on its techniques or methods, which can be learned by anyone. It depends on the skilled and judicious application of these with a sense of artistry beyond the natural capacity of most other surgeons. The future of plastic surgery and its stability as a specialty depends on investment in well-chosen men.

- Sir Benjamin Rank (1974)

Sir Benjamin Rank, the Founder of Plastic Surgery in Australia, was instrumental in establishing and promoting reconstructive surgery in the Asia Pacific region (► **Fig. 1**). He established the first formal plastic surgery training center in Melbourne and trained several renowned plastic surgeons across the globe from the early 1950s until over three decades later. He inspired the formation of our association and trained the earlier generation of plastic surgeons in India. He received training from Sir Harold Gillies, worked during the Second World War, and significantly impacted teaching worldwide. His life story is truly inspirational.

Fondly called “Benny,” he was born in 1911 in Heidelberg, Melbourne, Australia, to a family that owned a grain store and mill for a family business. His father was Wreghitt Rank, and his mother was Bessie née Smith.¹ He graduated from medical school with many honors and accolades and completed 2 years of residency at Royal Melbourne Hospital before leaving for the United Kingdom.^{1,2}

With Sir Harold Gillies

Mr. Rank arrived in London in 1937 to pursue a specialization in surgery and pass British fellowship exams. He obtained locum at Queen Mary’s Hospital Sidcup and St James Balham in London, where the “Big four” plastic surgeons were



Fig. 1 Sir B.K. Rank. Kt cr 1972, CMG 1955, KStJ 1988, MB, MS, LRCP, FRCS (Eng.), Hon. FRCS (Edin.), FRACS, FACS (Hon), FRCPS (Hon) Canada, DSc (Hon).

working. Sir Harold Gillies, Archie McIndoe, Rainsford Mowlem, all expatriate New Zealanders, and Thomas P Kilner worked in the same hospital following the First World

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War.³ Working with famed plastic surgeons during this period fascinated him with reconstructive procedures. He learned a great deal of reconstructive surgery procedures, including tube pedicle flaps described by Sir Harold Gillies by then in the same hospital. He was given the position of assistant plastic surgeon at Hill End Hospital.

Following the onset of the Second World War in 1940, Benny Rank joined the Royal Australasian Army Medical Corps. He was commissioned to command the Maxillofacial Plastic Surgery unit at the 2nd Australian General Hospital (AGH) in Egypt, located at El-Qantara on the Suez. In his writing, Benny says, "I had a good war," as he got an exceptional opportunity to serve and learn.⁴ He gained great expertise in treating trauma wounds and performing reconstructive procedures. His experience working in London was put to use, adopting many innovative techniques. In contrast to traditional closed-wound dressings, he opted for an open-wound approach with topical antimicrobial ointment to facilitate early skin grafting. His work earned him a promotion to the Rank of Major.

The First Plastic Surgery Department

In 1942, Benny Rank returned to Australia to establish Repatriation Hospital Heidelberg near Melbourne to serve war-injured military personnel and their families (→ Fig. 2). Among the patients treated was one flight lieutenant, John Gorton, who went on to become Prime Minister of Australia. Being close to military officers who later held positions of influence and power gave him an opportunity to regulate policy matters. Mr. Rank was instrumental in forming industrial safety regulations based on his numerous report submissions to the



Fig. 2 BK Rank scrubs up at the Heidelberg Military Hospital (1942).

Victoria government. He paved the way for reconstructive plastic surgery, which was then dominated by general surgeons.

Mr. Benny Rank established the first formal training program for plastic surgery in Australia at the Royal Melbourne Hospital in 1946. He built a team around him that became the center of plastic surgery development in Australia. Benny's trainees have been credited with innovative contributions.³ Felix Behan was the first to introduce the "Keystone flap," and John Hueston became famous for his Dupuytren's disease observations and treatise. Ian Tylor, the Pioneering micro surgeon of The Royal Melbourne Hospital, credits B K Rank abundantly in his Gillies Memorial Oration as "Gillies established and taught what became his '16 commandments of plastic surgery as they relate to tissue transfer'. He passed these on to Benny Rank with the beverage typical of the time in England, and then Benny came back to Australia and passed on this 'ice cold dope' to myself with a beverage a little more typical of the Australian scene."⁵

Dr. Rank was one of the pioneering hand surgeons who meticulously treated hand injuries and worked to establish safety regulations in the industry to prevent them. He became the first president of the Australian Hand Club in 1972. He coauthored a book called "Surgery of Repair as Applied to Hand Injuries" that ran to four editions.⁶ He was honored by the IFFSH as a true "Pioneer of Hand surgery." In 1987, he published his autobiography "Heads and Hands- An Era of Plastic Surgery."⁴

The Colombo Plan

In 1951, the Colombo Plan was launched by the member countries for collective intergovernmental economic and social growth in the Asia Pacific region. Australia played a major role in the initiation and was one of the major donor countries, along with the United States, United Kingdom, Japan, and New Zealand. A large focus was on the human resource exchange involving expertise in many fields to visit Asian countries. Reputed surgeon Benjamin Rank was requested for this task in providing support for reconstructive surgeries. He took a 3-month tour to Singapore in 1954, and performed 80 surgeries.⁷ On a similar assignment, he visited India and other countries in the region the following year.

Association with India

Following the First World War, in line with global developments, reconstructive surgeries in India were conducted in specialized units in the 1940s and early 1950s. Dr. C. Balakrishnan, Dr. R. Ganguly, Dr. Charles Pinto, Dr. N H Antia, and Dr. Murari M Mukherjee were pioneers; some had their training in the United Kingdom, initiated efforts to establish plastic surgical units in different parts of the country. During this time, the Indian government requested Mr. B. K. Rank's assistance in setting up plastic surgery departments in India under the Colombo plan. In 1955, he traveled to Nagpur and Calcutta and performed operations. Chief Minister B. C. Roy invited Mr. Rank to visit the Department of Plastic Surgery started by Prof. M.M. Mukherjee, which was inaugurated subsequently by Prime Minister Pandit Nehru in 1956.⁸

Mr. Rank spent 2 weeks in Nagpur, where Dr. C. Balakrishnan worked as a reader from 1950 and submitted a report for establishing an Institute of Plastic Surgery at Nagpur. Though the Australian government funded this proposal under the Colombo Plan, it did not progress due to the lack of matching grants from the Indian Government.⁹ During this time in 1955, the need to form an association was felt when only about five plastic surgeons were in the country. Mr. B.K. Rank supported the idea and said, "Even The Australian Association of Plastic Surgeons had only five founder members." Subsequently, the resolution was passed in 1956, and the association was formed in 1957 under the presidency of Dr. R. N. Cooper.⁹ In 1960, when he visited Poona, where the association's annual conference was held, he invited Lt. Col. Ramasay Ganguly to Australia for training.¹⁰ Many plastic surgeons from India visited Dr. Benjamin's unit for training for over two decades. Prof. U.S. Nayak from Madras Medical College, Dr. R. L. Manchanda (Patiala), Dr. S. S. Rawat (Rajasthan), Brig. R. Ganguly (Calcutta), Dr. C. Balakrishnan (Nagpur), and Dr. J. L. Gupta (Delhi) were among 15 plastic surgeons selected by Sir Benjamin Rank for training in Australia under the Commonwealth Fellowship.¹¹

Accolades

Sir B.K. Rank was the President of the 5th International Conference of Plastic Surgery, held in Melbourne in 1971. In 1972, he received a knighthood from Her Majesty the Queen.¹

He was the Sims Commonwealth Travelling Professor of the College in 1958, Moynihan Lecturer in 1972, President of the British Association of Plastic Surgeons in 1965, and President of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons from 1966 to 1968.

After retiring from the Royal Melbourne Hospital in 1966, he continued as a consultant at the Cancer Institute Board and the Victorian Plastic Surgery Unit. After retiring from clinical practice in 1983, he pursued his interests in golf, gardening, and painting, allowing him to expand his artistic talents. He was known for his exceptional painting skills and for organizing many charitable exhibitions. The paintings exhibited on each occasion were sold out, demonstrating the quality of his work.¹ In 1984, he was invited to accept the presidency of Interplast Australia, which provided teams of Australian and New Zealand plastic surgeons who conducted surgical programs in neighboring countries to correct various congenital anomalies.

Australasian Foundation for Plastic Surgery¹² provides a Travelling Fellowship Fund named in honor of Sir Benjamin Rank. Since its establishment in 2011, this fund has been used broadly for educational purposes of trainees in plastic surgery. The foundation also sponsors the annual prestigious Foundation BK Rank Lecture at the Royal College of Surgeons Scientific Congress and the biennial Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons Scientific Congress.

Mr. B.K. Rank married Barbara Lyle Facy in 1938. They had one son and three daughters. He passed away on January 26, 2002.¹³

In his Gillies Memorial Oration to the British Society in 1974, he mentions, "To survive the next era, we who call ourselves plastic surgeons have three general obligations. Firstly, to stick to our last and become even more expert in the tradition Gillies set in the artistic and varied applications of precision surgery; Secondly, not to drift too far from the centres of action, either in research or in practice; Finally, to select carefully and train our successors with all these things in mind."¹⁴ His words still hold true even after half a century for the plastic surgery community.

Figure Courtesy

► **Fig. 1:** <https://www.whpeopleshospital.com.au/story-six> (The People's Hospital Tales from the Surgeon's table)

► **Fig. 2.** <https://victoriancollections.net.au/items/5f3f4f519930b715980ea40e>. (From the collection of Royal Australasian College of Surgeons Museum and Archives)

Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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