

Medico-Legal Society of Queensland
50th Anniversary celebration
Banco Court
Friday, 22 November 2002, 6.30pm

Chief Justice Paul de Jersey AC

In welcoming you to the courthouse this evening, I have been invited to offer a brief historical snapshot of our host Society.

The Medico-Legal Society of Queensland was formed in 1952, after the British Medical Association approached the Queensland Law Society “with a view to forming a Medico-Legal Society which would be of benefit to both professions and to the community.” The inaugural meeting was held on 21 May 1952 at the Brisbane Chamber of Commerce Rooms in Adelaide Street, and Chief Justice Neal Macrossan was elected the Society’s President. He also subsequently addressed the Society’s first function, on the topic “Medical and legal aspects of drunkenness in relation to drivers of vehicles”.

Society membership was open to judges, barristers, solicitors and medical practitioners. The aim was to foster collegiality between the two professions, as well as providing a forum for the exchange of ideas on medico-legal issues. Meetings were held twice a year and addressed a wide variety of topics. Some dealt with the interaction of doctors and lawyers in court and medical negligence, while others addressed more general contemporary issues, like artificial insemination, homosexuality, what used to be called juvenile delinquency, and marriage guidance.

Although the Society seems to have been popular, as indicated by the number of members, which ranged between 154 and 162, it nonetheless met its demise on 22 October 1958, the date of what would prove to be the last meeting for 22 years. Apparently no one is certain why the Society disbanded: one suggestion is recurring tension over whether the Society’s President should be drawn from the medical or the legal profession!

The Society was reformed in 1981 at the suggestion of Dr Paul Gerber. The well-known neurosurgeon Dr Peter Landy took up that suggestion, in conjunction with Dr Lloyd Toft, Mr Des Derrington QC, Mr John O'Keefe (then President of the Queensland Law Society) and Mr Geoff Gargett. The inaugural meeting of the reformed Society took place on 20 February 1981 at the Queensland Law Society Rooms in QANTAS House. Dr Landy was elected as the Society's first President, establishing fitting continuity between the old and the new Society, as Dr Landy had been present at the first meeting in 1952.

The move to reform the Society was greeted enthusiastically: there was perceived need, with the increase in personal injuries litigation, and sometime friction between doctors and lawyers in court. Once again it was hoped the Society would foster mutual understanding between the two professions, as well as facilitate the exchange of ideas and the discussion of contemporary medico-legal problems.

The first Society function was held 14 May 1981, addressed by Justice Kirby on the topic "Limits to Professional Confidentiality". The event was extremely successful: membership numbers increased from 57 in the month preceding the talk, to 86 in the weeks following.

The Society has since been commendably active and currently has approximately 600 members. It has organized innumerable dinner lectures, as well as seminars and conferences, held in conjunction with Bond University, the Queensland Law Society CLE Department, the AMA (Queensland Branch) and the University of Queensland. The topics have been invariably stimulating, ranging over areas as diverse as "Health Complaints and Medical Litigation", "Evidence of States of Mind", and "The Sterilisation of Minors"; to "Death by Shiraz – The Amazing Life and Peculiar death of Napoleon Bonaparte" and "The Body Snatchers of Edinburgh".

As well as organising these functions the Society has provided assistance and sponsorship for events held by related organisations, such as the annual

conference of the Australian Law Students Association and the Queensland Medical Women's Association. In 1995 the Society convened an essay competition open to Queensland university students enrolled in either law or medicine, on the topic "Implications of the High Court's decision in *Rogers v Whittaker*", with a division open to each discipline, and prize money a generous \$2500 each.

What I have said is an extremely condensed account of what may be read in an excellent booklet prepared by the Supreme Court Library staff, entitled "A Brief History of the Society". In launching that booklet now, I commend those involved in its preparation, especially mentioning Mr Aladin Rahemtula, the Supreme Court Librarian and Ms Nicola Petzl, Ms Emma Haerse and Ms Rebecca Cook. Her Honour Justice White, the Chair of the Library Committee, also provided much valuable assistance.

Today, in its fiftieth year, though 22 of them quiescent, the Society is dynamic and strong and continues to serve both professions and related organisations. One may be optimistic it will continue to flourish for another fifty years. It has my enthusiastic support.