

Under the Microscope

by Earl Owen

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With an economy of prose and using a conversational, emotive style, microsurgeon Professor Earl Owen tells us the story of his life.

Disabled - but not handicapped - with a congenital defect, Owen's mission is to help those around him through the advancement of microsurgery (a specialty of which he may be considered the father) and make amends for the firsthand, hateful experience he endured from a surgeon as a child.

He illustrates the salient lesson that adult doses don't translate to children, particularly for radiotherapy, using his own body as an example.

Independent of thought and dismissed as a troublemaker (a title he would never fully outgrow), Owen grew up in a Victorian household of doctors as a precocious and dextrous child.

He operated before he was formally qualified to do so, and soon realised that the practitioners of his day were limited by their bedside manner and available resources.

Owen foresaw future possibilities in the field of microsurgery, and literally developed the tools and terminology to make this happen. He never stops thinking – from designing the chairs of the Sydney Opera House to his thoughts on brain transplantation, Owen is a visionary.

Like all life stories, Owen arrived at many crossroads which would shape and define his path in life.

Success accompanied him because he seized entrepreneurial endeavours (contrasted with an example of a peer who did not).

From his motivation and passionate writing, it is easy to have an understanding of the man, though Owen is probably not an easy person to live with.

He readily pointed out the shortcomings of patients' wellbeing within the medical bureaucracy, a habit which rewarded him with dismissal as often as praise.

Owen was frequently pulled in many directions; from research

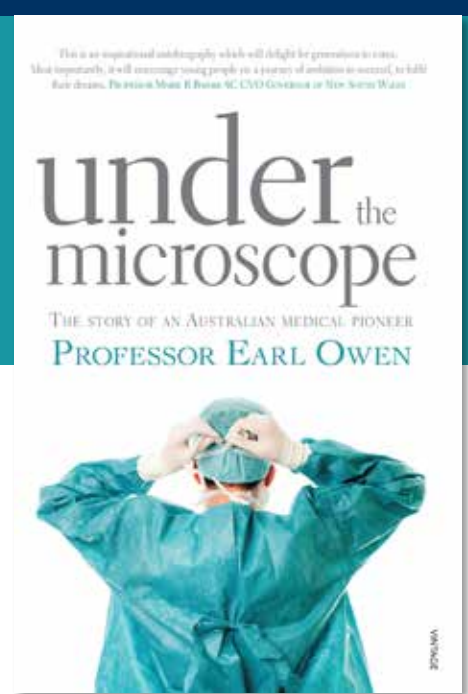
involving animal experimentation and vivisection (potentially off-putting to some readers), to advocating for thalidomide victims and fund-raising activities.

There were few pursuits away from medicine, presumably limited by time, though Owen was also a keen farmer, pianist, golfer and occasional family man. When others were retiring, he was pioneering limb and face transplantation.

His skill as a microsurgeon encroached on many other specialities (such as trauma, paediatrics, neurosurgery, fertility and transplantation medicine), earning him both supporters and detractors.

Regrettably, Owen was often let down by others, including an unsupportive first wife, and ambivalent colleagues and patients. There is the irony of Owen chiding a patient for their non-compliance then acting in the same manner!

At times he may be justifiably dramatic, such as when he observes,



“This assault on all my newborn tissue was to seriously affect my growth and health, and this was my destiny”.

We are privileged that such a high achiever and man of ideas has taken the time to write about his life, including some truly gripping sea voyage escapades.

Lesser people wouldn't dedicate their life to rectify the mistakes and conventions of the past.

Ultimately, this is a touching and engaging tale about a remarkable physician who healed himself and revolutionised a profession.

** Dr Zehetner is a Consultant Paediatrician, Pharmacist and Clinical Senior Lecturer.*