Press Release

Professor Nathan Efron, AC

An academic optometrist with a penchant for wearing flamboyant bow ties has been made a Companion of the Order of Australia. Professor Nathan Efron, who is a research professor at the Queensland University of Technology, received his award “for eminent service to medicine in the field of clinical optometry, particularly to vision correction and corneal physiology, as an academic, researcher and author, to the treatment of juvenile diabetes, and through executive roles with national and international professional organisations”.

Professor Efron is an expert in the field of contact lenses. When working in the UK in the 1990s, he played a pivotal role in developing the world’s first daily disposable contact lens. “Two Scottish entrepreneurs came to see me with a design concept for a daily disposable lens. I tested out the prototype lenses but they were a failure. So I helped them redesign the lens, and the rest is history”, said Professor Efron. Daily disposable contact lenses are now a $4 billion business world wide. He added “I probably should have asked for shares in the company rather than a meagre academic consulting fee”.

He has also pioneered the development a revolutionary eye test for assessing nerve damage in patients with diabetes. The technique has attracted international attention and is now being trialed around the world. “Fifty per cent of patients with diabetes have some degree of nerve damage, which if left unchecked, can lead to terrible pain in the arms and legs”, said Professor Efron. “The test that I devised involves examining fine nerve fibres in the cornea, which is the front clear window of the eye, using a special high powered instrument known as a laser-scanning confocal microscope”, he said. “It is quick and painless, and allows us to diagnose the condition, monitor progress and evaluate the effect of treatments.”

Professor Efron recently secured funding from the US-based National Institutes for Health to assemble a consortium of multidisciplinary researchers from Australia, the UK, USA, Canada and Qatar. The aim is to examine a combined cohort of over 600 diabetic patients with diabetic neuropathy, using this new eye test, over a 7 year period. “This research should firmly establish the diagnostic capabilities of this approach and in the long term lead to better treatment of patients with this debilitating condition”, he said.

Professor Efron, who is also President of the Australian College of Optometry and Vice-President of the International Society for Contact Lens Research, characterises himself as a fiercely proud Australian. “When I speak at international conference, I often intersperse my lectures with images of Australian landscapes, flora, fauna and famous celebrities.” He said. “In fact, on more than one occasion, I have been criticised for failing to show Australiana images during a lecture.” He added “I have always considered myself as both a scientific and cultural ambassador for Australia, which makes this award so poignant for me”.

For more information, or to interview Nathan Efron, he can be contacted as follows:
e-mail: n.efron@qut.edu.au
Mobile phone: 0448844851

Additional information about Professor Nathan Efron AC
Professor Nathan Efron completed his BScOptom and PhD at the University of Melbourne in 1981, and after two years of post-doctoral studies at the University of California, Berkeley and University of New South Wales, he returned to Melbourne as lecturer then senior lecturer responsible for contact lens education. In 1990 he took up the foundation Chair of Clinical Optometry at the University of Manchester, England, and established a contact lens research and consultancy unit known as Eurolens Research. In Manchester, Professor Efron served as Head of Department from 1992-97 and university-wide Dean of Undergraduate Studies (1992-1995) and Dean of Research (2001-2004). He was admitted to the degree of Doctor of Science at the University of Manchester in 1995.

He served on the General Optical Council of the United Kingdom for 9 years and was appointed as a subject specialist reviewer, and later institutional auditor, for the Quality Assurance Agency for the United Kingdom. Professor Efron established the United Kingdom branch of the University of Melbourne Alumnus Association, and served a term as its inaugural president.

Professor Efron returned to Australia in 2006 to his place of current employment as Research Professor in the School of Optometry and Vision Science and the Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation at the Queensland University of Technology. He established the Anterior Eye Laboratory where, as well as continuing his contact lens research, he has been exploring a range of new eye tests for diabetic neuropathy.

In the past eight years he has attracted over $7 million in peer-reviewed competitive funding from the National Health and Medical Research Council (Australia), National Institutes for Health (USA), Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation International (USA), American Optometric Foundation (USA) and George Weaber Trust (Queensland).

Professor Efron is currently President of the Australian College of Optometry and Vice-President of the International Society for Contact Lens Research. He has previously served as President of both the Cornea and Contact Lens Society of Australia (1981) and the British Contact Lens Association (1997).

He has published over 340 refereed scientific papers and another 500 clinical articles, textbook chapters and abstracts. His work is highly cited, with a career total of over 9,000 literature citations. As a prolific author of textbooks, Professor Efron has written/edited 8 books on contact lenses and general optometry, that have appeared in a total of 16 editions and foreign translations. He is currently working on the third edition of his popular book ‘Contact Lens Practice’ (Elsevier), which he expects to be published in early 2016. A project closely linked to his text books are his eponymous grading scales for contact lens complications. Approximately 200,000 of these scales have been distributed world-wide and they serve as a de facto international standard for documenting the severity of adverse ocular reactions to contact lens wear.

Professor Efron lectures extensively world-wide, particularly in the field of the ocular response to contact lens wear. He has presented lectures at over 500 conferences in 42 countries, mostly by invitation and often as the featured keynote speaker.

He has been an active and enthusiastic mentor throughout his career, having supervised 28 Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) and 16 Master of Science (MSc) candidates to successful completion, some of whom are professors in the UK and USA. He has also examined 29 higher degree theses, including two Doctor of Science (DSc) candidates.

Professor Efron has won a number of prestigious national and international awards, including the ‘Contribution to Optics’ award (Optician, UK, 1997); the British Contact Lens Association’s Dallos Award (1992) and Gold Medal (2001); the Peter Abel Award (Association of German Contact Lens Specialists, 2000); the American Academy of Optometry’s Garland W Clay Award (1980), Max Schapero Award (2003) and Glenn A Fry Award (2010); Optometry Australia’s J. Lloyd Hewett Award (2013); and the Kenneth W Bell Medal of the Cornea and Contact Lens Society of Australia (2015).