Sir Brian Gerald Barratt-Boyes was an internationally renowned cardiac surgeon. He was born in Wellington, New Zealand on 13 January 1924. He joined the Johnsonwill Primary and Wellington College and later graduated from the Otago University in 1946. He continued as a surgeon and from 1953-55 he was at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester working with the renowned cardiac surgeon John Kirklin. After this he spent a year in Bristol, England.

Returning to New Zealand in 1957 he joined the Greenlane Hospital in Auckland. He was to spend the rest of his career there.

He did pioneering work in replacing the aortic valve with a homograft. He also was a pioneer in perfecting the use of hypothermia and circulatory arrest during open heart surgery. This led to the use of the technique in numerous congenital heart defects. His success rate was so high that the Greenlane Hospital came to be regarded as the yardstick against which other results were compared. The first coronary bypass operation at the hospital was done in 1969.

He was very hardworking and a hard taskmaster having surgeons from all over the world working with him. He instilled the concept of teamwork. This resulted in an international reputation for him to the extent that the Mayo Clinic (which was considered very highly for cardiac surgery) even referred a severely ill patient to him.

In spite of numerous offers to work in other countries he declined them preferring to remain in New Zealand and making his hospital one of the world’s best.

In 1970 he became a Fellow of the Royal Society and the following year the University of Auckland made him the Professor of Surgery. Later on he was awarded the Fellowships of the American College of Surgeons in 1977, the Royal College of Surgeons in 1985 and the American College of Cardiology in 1989. From 1986-87 he was President of the Cardiac Society of Australia and New Zealand. Such was his fame that almost all countries of the world bestowed honours on him. In 1966 he was awarded Commander of the British Empire and in 1971 was knighted at the young age of 47.

He had the cause of poor patients to his heart and criticised the government for under-funding medical facilities for the poor. In 1969 he demonstrated that poor patients were dying because of poor funding. He iterated this in 1975 and again in 1986.

With John Kirklin he coauthored a book, “Cardiac Surgery”. This was widely acclaimed and The American Journal of Cardiology called it “absolutely magnificent.”

He retired in 1988 to his farm and grew grapes. He worked on his book and spent time with his family. In his youth he had been an excellent pianist and at one stage had even thought of being a concert pianist!

He eventually fell a victim to the disease he had been so interested in and underwent coronary bypasses four times!

He died on 8 March 2006 being survived by his widow and five sons.

Contributed by
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