

Hong Kong Rotarian Dr. Joseph Lexden Shellshear

Army Officer / Archaeologist / Medical Scientist / General Practitioner

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Dr. Joseph Lexden Shellshear, MD (*Sydney*), Australian, was an Active Member of the Rotary Club of Hong Kong (香港扶輪社) briefly in the Club's early few years when he was chair of Anatomy Department at the University of Hong Kong (香港大學) from 1923 to 1936, holding the Classification "Education – Medicine".



Joseph Lexden (Joe) Shellshear (1885-1958), army officer and professor of anatomy, was born on 31 July 1885 at Stanmore, Sydney, Australia, third of eleven children of London-born parents Walter Shellshear, civil engineer, and his wife Clara Mabel, née Eddis. Joe boarded at King's College, Goulburn. From 1902 he was Renwick scholar in medicine at the University of Sydney (M.B., Ch.M., 1907; M.D., 1929). Following a year as a resident medical officer at Sydney Hospital, he set up a practice at Albury in 1908. At the Catholic Apostolic Church, Melbourne, on 23 July that year he married Hildred Muriel Christina Robertson; their only child, a son, died in infancy.

Having served as an artillery officer in the Militia, Shellshear was appointed Major, Australian Imperial Force (A.I.F.), on 20 October 1915 and posted to the 5th Field Artillery Brigade (F.A.B.). By July he was commanding a battery on the Western Front. In April 1917 he was promoted Lieutenant Colonel and given command of the 4th F.A.B. For ably leading his men and providing accurate fire, particularly at Bullecourt, France, in May, and at Ypres, Belgium, in August-September, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order. He was twice mentioned in dispatches. On 3 April 1918 he reverted to Major at his own request and transferred to the Australian Army Medical Corps. His A.I.F. appointment terminated in England on 3 January 1920.

To refresh his medical training, Shellshear undertook research at University College, London, as a Rockefeller fellow and subsequently as a senior demonstrator in anatomy. He and another Sydney graduate Raymond Dart worked together in Professor (Sir) Grafton Elliot Smith's Department and became deeply interested in the embryology of the nervous system and in anthropology. In 1921 they jointly lectured in the United States of America as Rockefeller fellows.

Shellshear accepted the chair of anatomy at the University of Hong Kong in 1922, turned to the study of the brain "of modern humans" and also carried out field-work in prehistory. He represented the University at the golden jubilee of the University of Adelaide in 1926 and was awarded the *ad eundem* degree of M.S. (Adel.). In 1929 he gained his doctorate in *absentia* from the University of Sydney. He remained in the British Crown Colony Hong Kong until 1936. Twice Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, he presided (1929-30) over the local branch of the British Medical Society. He published prolifically on the comparative morphology and blood supply of the cerebrum (forebrain).

Back in Sydney in 1936, without a formal position, Shellshear served in an honorary capacity as prehistorian at the Australian Museum and in the Department of Anatomy at the University of Sydney. In May 1937 he was appointed research professor in the Department. Meanwhile, he resumed private medical practice, working in radiology with his brother Kenneth in Macquarie Street until 1958.

In more than twenty major scientific articles in learned journals, Shellshear continued his interest in the anatomy and blood supply of the brain, especially the cerebrum. His research on comparative brain structure was detailed, comprehensive and disciplined. He documented and published his findings on the differences in brain structure of distinct groups of humans—Chinese, Africans and Australian Aborigines. It was his hope that knowledge would ease rather than exacerbate racial or ethnic tensions.

In the 1930s he wrote: "If anthropologists studying the history of man, ethnologists studying the customs of the races, and anatomists examining the structure of the body, can tell one race why another race does certain things, thinks certain thoughts, science will have helped the world a long way to peace, particularly in the Pacific, where so many peoples are watching each other."

During World War II Shellshear provided classes for young surgeons-lieutenant to help them to gain their formal surgical qualifications. The teaching dossiers he prepared for their use were published as *Surveys of Anatomical Fields* (1949), co-edited by N. W. G. Macintosh. Shellshear also taught extensively in the Department of Anatomy during the resource-starved war years. His distinguished scholarly work included his painstaking cataloguing of the Department's major anthropological collection. He retired from the University in 1948.

A quiet and unassuming man, with an infectious keenness for his work, Shellshear was recalled with affection by his colleagues and by surgeons of the Australian armed forces. He

enjoyed playing golf, and belonged to the Imperial Service and University clubs. Survived by his wife, he died on 22 March 1958 at Royal North Shore Hospital, St. Leonards, and was buried in Northern Suburbs cemetery.

The J. L. Shellshear Museum of Comparative Anatomy and Physical Anthropology, University of Sydney, was named after him.

Select Bibliography

- G. E. Hall and A. Cousins (eds), Book of Remembrance of the University of Sydney in the Great War, 1914-1918 (Syd, 1939)
- British Medical Journal, 16 Aug 1958, p 453, 23 Aug 1958, p 517, 6 Sept 1958, p 643
- Sydney Morning Herald, 4 Aug 1922, 23 July 1926, 18 Aug 1928, 10 May 1938, 24 Mar 1958
- Shellshear papers (Shellshear Museum, Department of Anatomy, University of Sydney).



The J. L. Shellshear Museum of Comparative Anatomy and Physical Anthropology, University of Sydney, specialises in human, other primate and mammalian skeletal collections. It includes casts of human ancestors and other hominids. The museum is located on the top floor of the Anderson Stuart building, room W601.

The museum is named after Joseph Lexden Shellshear (1885-1958) a Sydney University medical graduate who was the Research Professor of Anatomy at the University of Sydney from 1937 to 1948. He is known for his work on the development of the peripheral nervous system on the study of the arterial blood supply to the brain and on the comparative morphology of the human skull and brain.

Shellshear donated to the Department of Anatomy a large collection of human brains (no longer extant), skull and brain casts, books, bound scientific papers and records relating to his research work.

This material was added to the Department's osteological and zoological collections to form this museum, established and named in Shellshear's honour in 1959. Since then, much anthropological and archival material has been added to the collections. The museum has been completely refurbished and has become an important research facility for anthropological, forensic and other research work.