

EDITORIAL HISTORY OF PLASTIC AND MILITARY SURGERY

Professional exchange across a vanishing divide: the 1989 plastic surgery delegation to the USSR

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Keywords: plastic surgery, history, international perspectives, Soviet Union

Submitted: November 24, 2025 AEST Accepted: April 21, 2026 AEST

DOI: 10.34239/ajops.162782

Australasian Journal of Plastic Surgery

Vol 9, Issue 2, 2026

In August and September of 1989, only three months before the fall of the Berlin Wall and significant geopolitical change, a delegation of 11 Australian plastic surgeons travelled to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) under the auspices of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS), Division of Plastic Surgery.¹ Over 17 days, the group experienced more than a study tour; it was a rare moment of professional exchange conducted in an era when surgical systems, political ideologies and access to knowledge were divided.

The delegation, led by Richard Watson and including Frank Ham, Bruce Taylor, Barrie Milroy, Russell Aldred, Richard Anthony Rieger, Leon Pitchon, Benjamin Rank, John Hanrahan, Harold McComb and Harry Hansen-Karnhoi, departed Adelaide for Singapore on 20 August 1989. Early travel was marked by logistical uncertainty and disrupted arrangements, including the unexplained cancellation of a scheduled visit to the Microvascular Hospital in Tashkent. Substantive engagement began in Leningrad, where the surgeons visited Uritchkaya Hospital (Hospital No 12), a 600-bed institution dating to the eighteenth century. Despite the expected limitations of Soviet infrastructure at the time, the delegation observed well-maintained wards, modern anaesthesia systems and operating theatres with drum autoclaves.

A notable moment of professional exchange occurred during the train journey from Leningrad to Moscow. Three RACS examiners and several

heads of unit conducted an impromptu Division of Plastic Surgery meeting, discussing registrar training, barriers to assessment and future directions for fellowship examinations. This encounter demonstrates how international travel can facilitate critical reflection on domestic surgical practice.

In Moscow, the delegation visited the Department of Microsurgery at the National Research Centre of Surgery, led by Professor Nicolai Milanov, a State Prize Laureate. Delegates observed microsurgical instrumentation manufactured in the USSR, comparable to Western standards, and participated in candid clinical reviews. By contrast, the visit to the Hospital of Plastic Surgery, established in 1950, was marked by limited openness from the Institute's director. This experience highlights that professional exchange depends as much on institutional culture as on surgical skill.

Odessa represented the most collegial engagement. At the Medical Institute for Maxillofacial Surgery and Stomatology, led by Professor GI Semchenko, the delegation participated in vibrant, multilingual discussion. Common challenges included high volumes of maxillofacial trauma, resource limitations in cleft lip and palate surgery, and the aspiration to develop microvascular reconstructive capacity. Several Soviet surgeons expressed interest in visiting Australia, reflecting the nascent opening of professional borders prior to the USSR's

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dissolution on 26 December 1991, less than two and a half years after the delegation's visit. The visit also included the Filatov Research Institute of Eye Diseases and Tissue Therapy, birthplace of the Filatov tube pedicle flap, offering insight into a centre of global reconstructive significance.

Re-examination of the 1989 visit underscores several lessons. Despite political and systemic differences, surgeons in Leningrad, Moscow, Odessa and Australia faced comparable clinical challenges. The visit illustrated the value of international collaboration in strengthening professional standards, as seen in the impromptu examiner meeting. The contrast between the open engagement in Odessa and the guarded atmosphere in Moscow demonstrates that surgical progress relies on transparency and dialogue. Finally, the historical timing, just before the collapse of the USSR, highlights how geopolitical forces shape access to institutions, colleagues and knowledge. The visit stands as both a historical record and a reminder of the importance of international cooperation in surgery.

Conflict of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Funding declaration

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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