

George Earle Dunlop Brown



George Earle Dunlop (“Earle”) Brown FRACS, FRCS (Eng) was one of the formative figures in New Zealand plastic and hand surgery. He died on 8 November 2025. A quiet, courteous and meticulous surgeon, he combined technical innovation with a deep sense of service to his patients at Middlemore Hospital, to colleagues and trainees across the country and to communities throughout the Pacific.

Born in Stratford in 1936 and raised in Clyde, Central Otago, Earle graduated MB ChB from the University of Otago in 1960 and completed compulsory military training with the First Casualty Clearing Station and Otago University Medical Company. After early surgical posts, he joined the plastic surgery department at Middlemore Hospital in 1963 as a registrar under Sir William Manchester, beginning a professional association that

would shape both his career and the development of New Zealand plastic surgery. Further training in the United Kingdom led to the FRCS (England) in 1967, followed by FRACS in Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery in 1970.

His time at Canniesburn Hospital in Glasgow, under leaders such as Ian McGregor and Ian Jackson, left a lasting mark on his technique, philosophy and lifelong emphasis on careful tissue handling. Returning to Auckland in 1970, he became a senior registrar at Middlemore and was promoted to consultant plastic surgeon in 1972. Over his 40 years at Middlemore, Earle shaped modern plastic surgery in New Zealand. With Onkar Mehrotra, he co-founded the combined plastics–orthopaedic “Red Team”, pioneering hand surgery and completing one of the country’s earliest successful upper-limb replantation in

1974. His ingenuity, using jeweller's loupes and fine forceps to extend microsurgical capability, placed him at the forefront of surgical innovation. His papers on the indirect deltopectoral flap, oesophageal reconstruction, limb replantation and complex facial trauma reflected a career-long interest in solving difficult reconstructive problems and adapting emerging techniques to local conditions.

Earle's influence extended well beyond the operating theatre. He served as secretary of the New Zealand Association of Plastic Surgeons and of the New Zealand Society for Surgery of the Hand. He also represented New Zealand on the executive of the section of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons and the Asian Pacific section of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery. He was New Zealand's representative at the International Congress of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery in Yokohama, Japan. At Middlemore he led the plastic surgery department for 7 years before becoming the clinical director of surgery and immediate care in the late 1990s, overseeing all surgical services during a period of significant growth and change.

He was also an exceptional teacher. For decades he organised weekly registrar teaching sessions. Later, he and his wife Gay even hosted Sunday evening tutorials at their home for trainees preparing for fellowship exams. Many surgeons who trained under him cite his generosity, clarity and kindness. A colleague describes how "*of all the consultants, apart from Sir William, Earle contributed the most to the department... We owe him a debt of gratitude for his work in promoting and running the department.*"

Earle was a prolific author. His major works include:

- *Introduction to Local Flaps: A Surgeon's Handbook* (with Michael Klaassen), 2011
- *An Examiner's Guide to Professional Plastic Surgery Exams* (with Michael Klaassen), Springer, 2018
- *Perfection: The life and times of Sir William Manchester* (with Michael Klaassen), Mary Egan Publishing, 2021
- *Middlemore Hospital: The First Two Decades* (with Wally Robbins), Mary Egan Publishing, 2024

Notably, they also include two collaborations with Professor Felix Behan, whose influential technique, the "keystone flap", Earle admired greatly:

- *Defining Local Flaps: Clinical Applications and Methods* (with Michael Klaassen and Felix Behan), 2016
- *Simply Local Flaps* (with Michael Klaassen and Felix Behan), Springer, 2018

These texts, along with his historical essay "War, Facial Surgery and Itinerant Kiwis", helped shape modern understandings of flap surgery and the history of plastic surgery in New Zealand.

These publications reflect two constants in Earle's life: his desire to make difficult surgery more accessible to others and his determination to record the story of those who built the specialty. Those same instincts underpinned his long association with the Sir William and Lady Lois Manchester Charitable Trust, where after retirement he served as a medical adviser.

Service also defined his work beyond New Zealand. From the 1970s onwards he participated in numerous voluntary surgical missions across the Pacific and Asia, including programmes in Papua New Guinea (Port Moresby and coastal hospitals), the Philippines (Mindanao and surrounding regions), Tuvalu, Kiribati, Fiji, Indonesia and the Solomon Islands. Working often in challenging conditions, with unreliable power, limited sterilisation, basic equipment and crowded wards, he treated patients with burns, cleft lip and palate, hand injuries and neglected tumours who would otherwise have had little or no access to specialist care. His mission diaries reveal not only surgical ingenuity and persistence, but also deep empathy for patients and respect for local staff.

Alongside this demanding professional life, Earle's anchor was his wife, Gay (née Grant), whom he first met when she was a theatre nurse in the Middlemore plastic surgery unit. She quietly showed the young registrar how to assemble a skin-grafting knife. In time they became lifelong partners in work, family and adventure. Gay's support was woven through every stage of his career, from long on-call nights and overseas meetings to their later years of shared interests in travel, reading and family history.

In retirement Earle and Gay turned some of their meticulous energy to genealogy, exploring the Brown, Buchanan, Grant, MacGregor and related Scottish and Irish lines, and visiting the places where their forebears had lived. Their collaborative family histories echo the same patient scholarship that characterised his medical writing.

Colleagues remember Earle as a true gentleman,

careful and exacting in theatre, quietly determined in committee rooms, unfailingly kind with trainees and patients and always ready with a story that illuminated both the past and the present. His legacy lives on in the thousands of patients

whose lives he improved, the surgeons he trained, the missions he served, and the written record he leaves of a formative era in New Zealand plastic surgery.