Born in Sydney in 1911, Sydney Dattilo Rubbo was educated at Sydney Boys’ High School and the University of Sydney (BSc, 1934) before travelling to London to further his studies. He obtained a diploma in bacteriology from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (1935) and was awarded a scholarship for microbiological research at the University of London (PhD, 1937). Returning to Australia in 1937, Rubbo took up an appointment as a senior lecturer in the Department of Bacteriology at the University of Melbourne where he taught students of medicine, dentistry, science and agricultural science. A ‘brilliant and provocative lecturer’, he inspired a generation of students. He also studied and completed a medical degree (MB, BS, 1943) and in 1945, at the age of 33, was appointed Professor of Bacteriology (Microbiology from 1964), a position he held until 1969.

Under Rubbo’s leadership, the Department of Microbiology rapidly developed into the largest and best of its kind in Australia. Faced with limited funds and a chronic lack of laboratory space, Rubbo argued for, and eventually obtained, a new building and greatly expanded facilities for the conduct of microbiological research and teaching within the University. He built up a first-class teaching and research department with an array of talented individuals who went on to influence bacteriology and microbiology throughout Australia.

Rubbo’s own contribution to Australian microbiology was significant. As a researcher he undertook important work in the production of a new antiseptic, helped develop industrial fermentation processes and studied alternative drug therapies against tuberculosis. He worked on the prevention of tetanus and became a fervent advocate for immunisation against poliomyelitis, helping launch the Salk vaccine in Australia in the 1950s. Rubbo was also responsible for the University’s Public Health Laboratory (later the Microbiological Diagnostic Unit). He obtained funds to increase the unit’s diagnostic and epidemiological services for the recognition of infectious diseases and publicly supported efforts to regulate the pasteurisation of milk and to reduce the incidence of food contamination.

But Rubbo’s particular field of interest was disinfection and sterilisation, where he focused on the control of transmission pathways and reduction of cross-infection in hospitals, and even the sterilisation of returning spacecraft. His book, A Review of Sterilization and Disinfection as applied to Medical, Industrial and Laboratory Practice (London, 1965), co-authored with Joan Gardner, became a standard text worldwide.

Rubbo was an enthusiastic supporter of the Australian Society for Microbiology and one of its founding fathers. He chaired the inaugural meeting in 1959, was the founding chairman of the Victorian Branch and became the Society’s second President (1960-61).

Sydney Rubbo died unexpectedly of coronary atherosclerosis in 1969 in the garden of his holiday home at Mount Martha. He was survived by his wife of 31 years, Ellen, and their four children. Rubbo’s premature death shocked the microbiology community, who swiftly established a trust in his name. As well as being used to endow the Rubbo Oration given at each Annual Scientific Meeting of the Australian Society for Microbiology, the trust commissioned a bronze sculpture in memory of Rubbo, which stands in the courtyard near the microbiology and immunology building of the University of Melbourne.

Sources
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