THE VA PLASTIC EYE AND RESTORATIONS PROGRAM
AN INTRODUCTION

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Through the ages man has sought replacements for the various parts of the human body lost or rendered useless through war injury, accident, disease, or birth defects. His progress in this pursuit has been directly proportional to his progress up the ladder of technological development. Ironically, it seems that the most spectacular advancements in this deeply humane effort have been made possible as a result of man's own inhumanity to man, namely, through the instrumentality of war. In the aftermath of such periods, science and technology often seem to achieve high level development and innovations. Unusual and new materials, systems, and methodologies are developed out of necessity, pressed into service, and accepted at an accelerated pace—a pace far more rapid than would have occurred during periods of normal peacetime research and industrial growth.

The modern plastic artificial eye illustrates this phenomenon. Prior to World War II the glass artificial eye was the prosthesis universally accepted as the most satisfactory replacement for a human eye—lost for whatever reason. Comparatively few artisans in this country and abroad were engaged in making these prostheses.

With the advent of World War II it became apparent that the foreign sources would, for the most part, be lost for the duration, and the domestic sources would probably be found inadequate to supply the demand. In addition, it may have been that the fragility of the glass artificial eye was brought sharply into focus during the period of hospitalization and rehabilitation of the war wounded. For these and other reasons, the dental officers of the military forces, alerted to the situation, sought a more durable substitute and began to explore the problem. Using their knowledge of plastic materials and processing techniques, considerable progress was made. The dental officers in the Army were brought together to work collectively on the development of a plastic artificial eye. Their mission was spectacularly successful and a program was established to train other
Army dental officers in the methods and techniques involved in plastic eye prostheses. Upon completion of their training, these officers were assigned to various Army hospitals to establish Plastic Eye Clinics and furnish plastic artificial eyes to military personnel. The entire program was highly successful and these new prostheses were readily accepted by the patients.

Late in 1945 the Veterans Administration began its preparation to establish plastic eye clinic facilities and to staff them with trained personnel for the purpose of furnishing these prostheses to eligible and entitled military personnel being discharged from service. Early in 1946, a Plastic Artificial Eye Program was initiated within the Prosthetic Appliance Service of the Department of Medicine and Surgery. The program which was generated called for the activation of a Plastic Eye Clinic in fifteen VA hospitals and regional offices in areas selected on the basis of population density and geographic location. The locations were Atlanta, Ga.; Baltimore, Md.; Boston, Mass.; Cleveland, Ohio; McKinney, Texas; Denver, Colo.; Hines, Ill.; Los Angeles, Calif.; Memphis, Tenn.; New York, N.Y.; Philadelphia, Pa.; Portland, Ore.; St. Louis, Mo.; St. Paul, Minn.; and San Francisco, Calif. During the ensuing years the Baltimore Clinic was removed to Washington, D.C., and the clinics at Denver, Colo. and McKinney, Texas were deactivated.

Initially, plastic eyes were the only prostheses to be fabricated, but it soon became evident that other types of cosmetic restorations and appliances would also be needed to rehabilitate veterans who had suffered disfiguring facial and body injuries. To meet this potential demand, the Veterans Administration made arrangements with the University of Maryland School of Medicine to establish two intensive courses of training for all Plastic Eye Clinic personnel. These courses were concentrated solely on the study of the techniques and materials utilized in the fabrication of cosmetic plastic artificial ears, noses, orbital areas (including an artificial eye, where appropriate), and non-functional hands and gloves. At the conclusion of each course the dentists and technicians were assigned to various clinics established in the selected VA hospitals and regional office outpatient clinics. While the original staffing pattern has changed during the ensuing years, individual clinic personnel have contributed greatly to the advancement and refinement of the art of fabricating cosmetic plastic facial and body restorations, constantly remaining alert to the utilization of new and improved materials developed by the plastics industry. During the early period of the development of the VA program, the Director of the Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service and the Chief, Restorations and Sensory Aids, were active in the founding and establishment of a new professional group now known as the “American Academy of Maxillofacial Prosthetics.”
These two VA officials served as the Academy's second and third president, each in his turn serving as vice-president under his predecessor. The former Chief of the VA Plastic Eye and Restorations Clinic, VA Prosthetics Center, New York, also served as president of the academy and following his tenure of office served as executive secretary for the group until his recent retirement from the VA.

In addition to the contributions of the professional staff to the promotion of non-government interest in this medical care modality, developments were taking place within the VA program itself. Because of its location in the largest U.S. population center and its proximity to a wide variety of industrial products produced or represented locally, the Plastic Eye and Restorations Clinic in the VA Regional Office, New York City, was considered the agency's center for research, development, and training. As its functions and areas of development broadened, so did those of all of the other clinics in the program. While the New York clinic pursued more formalized programs for the development and improvement of new techniques and the use of new materials, each technician in the other clinics acted as an independent investigator and contributed much to the program and state of the art within the agency. From time to time advanced and refresher training programs for VA clinic personnel were conducted at the New York clinic. During these sessions the chiefs of all the clinics were brought together and trained in the various new concepts and techniques. Each clinic chief presented new ideas or improvements generated by and used in his clinic in providing service to patients. Over the years as the knowledge and experience of the technicians grew and expanded, so did the variety of restorations, appliances, devices, and services which they rendered. The productive capabilities of these clinics now range from artificial eyes to body implants and include such items as skull plates, artificial noses, ears, and other facial and body restorations as well as a wide variety of custom appliances for rehabilitative training and unusual and original devices required in some of the many medical research projects conducted in the various hospitals. The services rendered demand highly developed artistic and manual skills.

It has indeed been unfortunate that little information about these developments has reached other persons engaged in this relatively new field, but this situation is being corrected. The Plastic Eye and Restorations Clinic in the VA Regional Office, New York, was recently organizationally realigned as an element of the VA Prosthetics Center at the same address. Under the aegis of this arm of the Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service, it is expected that information on VA developments in techniques, materials, and methodologies for fabricating and fitting cosmetic facial and body restorations will be submitted to the VA Bulletin of Prosthetics Research and other professional journals and publications. It is also intended that
as part of our future planning, we will develop and offer training courses and seminars to personnel of other government and civilian agencies as well as to non-affiliated individuals who are engaged in providing these services to disabled and disfigured civilian patients.

As part of its constant efforts to provide high quality service the Plastic Eye and Restorations Clinic in the VA Prosthetics Center is developing formal quality standards and materials specifications for the various types of prostheses fabricated. It is particularly important that the finished restorations be carefully examined and evaluated to assure that high standards are maintained.

It is hoped that this short introduction will acquaint the reader with VA's efforts in the restorations field. Anyone interested in more detailed information is invited to write to the Editor of this Bulletin.