



Figure 1. Sally, Greg and Anne Wisbey in Yemen, circa 1967.

40 years of Wisbey Dental

By Joseph Allbeury

In 2019, Wisbey Dental celebrates its 40th year in business. Back in 1979, James and Shirley Wisbey established J. Wisbey & Associates Pty Ltd to distribute dental surgical instruments. Within five years, the company had broadened its range to include a selection of dental x-ray film processors and chemistry, especially appropriate as it utilised James' skills as a fully qualified radiographer. Over the ensuing 40 years, Wisbey Dental's product range has evolved to include a wide variety of name brand items from a broad selection of reputable international manufacturers and suppliers. James and Shirley's son, Greg joined the Company

in 1998 and having lived and worked in a number of regional and South East Asian countries, brought many years of experience in Australian export trading to his family business. Today, Wisbey Dental specialises in various dental, medical and surgical equipment items. The items range from dental and surgical handpieces and instruments, to electric surgical systems for facial re-construction and implantology, portable dental units and a wide range of dental surgery equipment. Wisbey Dental is the primary supplier of automatic dental x-ray film processors and related chemistry to the Australian and New Zealand markets. The geographical distribution area that Wisbey Dental covers includes Australia, New Zealand,

Papua New Guinea, the Pacific Islands and various South East Asian countries.

As a personal friend of mine and a long time supporter of Australasian Dental Practice, Greg had told me many tales of the Wisbey family and the history of Wisbey Dental. However, before 2019 disappeared completely, I recorded an interview with Greg to celebrate and document the 40 year milestone in his family history in the magazine. Without either of us knowing, the timing was more relevant than either of us could have anticipated.

The interview took place on Friday, November 29, 2019. Greg and I had just finished lunch and we were seated in his car opposite my office. I recorded our conversation on an iPhone.

I was born in Melbourne and my family was based in Melbourne. However, we left Australia in 1966 to go and live firstly in Egypt, where we stayed in Cairo and then Alexandria. Dad had begun working for the United Nations World Health organization. He's a radiographer by profession and he was employed to teach radiology technology to the people of the Yemen Arab Republic. That was his primary task at the time. So we went from Cairo to Alexandria and then to Sana'a in North Yemen. In those days, it was the Yemen Arab Republic. The South of Yemen was controlled as the British crown colony of Aden and we lived in Sana'a to the north.

"I remember going to the airport, hearing the bombs going off, seeing the orange glow on the horizon and hearing machine guns firing. It was a crazy time. When we got to Asmara the next day, we found out that rather than going back to Yemen after a couple of days, the place we lived in had been bombed flat. Everything we had was gone and we were never going back..."

Sana'a was a walled city and every night, the gates would be closed and they lived a feudal Sharia law lifestyle that exists pretty much to this day, although Sana'a is now a very different city.

We were the first Australian family ever to live there and when we first arrived, there was no accommodation for foreigners. So we were put up in the old palace. The previous Imam of North Yemen had a massive palace that he'd recently been evacuated from and that was given to us to live in. We stayed there for quite some time before an apartment building was set-up in town, which is where we then lived for the remainder of our time in Yemen with other people from the UN.



Figure 2. James "Jim" Wisbey and Shirley Wisbey in Yemen.

The lifestyle there was very different to Australia. As children, we had no schooling locally. We had to do correspondence school from Australia, so we would get school packages sent over. My two sisters and I, my older sister, Anne and younger sister, Sally, would do school work with my mother as the teacher. We'd start at about seven o'clock in the morning and finish at about 11:30, after which time I would usually bolt out the front door, jump onto my friend Mohammed's donkey cart and disappear into the souqs and the markets and be gone all day. It was never a problem. We were safe there. Everyone respected us and as children and as adults, we were welcomed by everybody. It was quite an incredible place.

There were not many foreigners there and the foreigners that were there were usually working for various other government agencies.

Late in 1968, the American chargé d'affaires in Yemen called my parents one night and said, "You've got four hours to leave the country. There's a plane coming in because Egypt is about to bomb Sana'a." And then a US Air Force plane landed and they evacuated us from Yemen across the Red Sea to Asmara in Eritrea, which was then part of northern Ethiopia.

I remember at the time going to the airport, hearing the bombs going off, seeing the orange glow on the horizon and hearing machine guns firing. It was a crazy time. When we got to Asmara the next day, we found out that rather than going back to Yemen after a couple of days, the place we lived in had been bombed flat. Everything we had was gone and our friends had been killed. We were never going back. There was nothing to go back to and everything that was there had been destroyed.



From Sana'a to safety...

In the early dawn light an American DC6 aircraft left Sana'a capital city of Yemen, southern Arabia. On that flight were six people from the American Embassy and an Australian family of five. Their departure was stop secret and urgent. They had been given 48 hours to leave the country.

Mr. Wisbey found food and clothing to be lacking. Fresh meat almost unobtainable. "To get fresh meat I had to walk outside the city wall to where the beasts were slaughtered and bring it home before the flies got to it." At the Embassy the man was covered with flies as they got up on the ground. It was said, "Expensive items in Australia, particularly electrical goods, were absent in Sana'a." "Our only source of entertainment was in tape-recorder we bought when we arrived. NO TELEVISION in the city — nothing to be seen — as we recorded music." The Yemenis lived in 13th century huts. Bombings and snail excursions were a popular form of mail order in Australia, London and the...

● The dawn escape from Arabia still fresh in their memories, the Wisbey family look forward to a relaxing holiday in Albury. They are, from left: Mr. Wisbey, Gregory (8), Anne (11), Mrs. Wisbey and Sally (7).

Mr. Wisbey, Gregory (8), Anne (11), Mrs. Wisbey and Sally (7). —speak Arabic fluently. Life starts early for Arab women, for one might find girls married at the age of nine, added Mrs. Wisbey. The U.S. has given Mr. Wisbey a break of four months. It will find him a good friend will come and see.

THE FOREIGN SERVICE OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

American Embassy, SANA'A, YAR From Asmara, Ethiopia

June 15, 1967



SM.H. Oct. '67

YEMEN THROUGH AUSTRALIAN EYES

ONE OF the few Australians who is not confused by the recent military coup in Yemen is Jim Wisbey, a 37-year-old medical radiographer from Melbourne.

Mr. Wisbey returned from the Yemen Republic last June, when the Arab-Israeli crisis erupted, after spending 12 months as a technical adviser on X-ray technology to the Yemen Government.

He believes that he, his wife Shirley, and their three young children are the only Australians to have lived there.

Flanked by Saudi Arabia and the Aden Protectorates, Yemen has been a scene of fighting between Republicans and Royalists since 1962.

In Sydney yesterday Mr. Wisbey, plump and very cheerful behind a neat little moustache, gave DATA some of his impressions of the country.

"One of these days I want to go back there," he said. "So please don't repeat too many things which would make it impossible to do this."

However, several of Mr. Wisbey's stories, which he plans to include in a book he has just begun, are unlikely to please his former hosts.

There was the incident in Sana'a, the Yemen capital, where he spent much of his time, when he forced his way through a large crowd in the city square to



President al-Sallal (centre). Second on his right is his former security chief (with the long hair). On Sallal's left (in dark glasses) is the former Minister for the Interior, Brigadier Ahnoomi, known as "The Butcher."

...Y CONCERN

1967, Mr. & Mrs. James Wisbey and their three children were evacuated with United States Embassy personnel to Asmara, Ethiopia. The Americans had been evacuated by the Government of the Republic of Yemen that government's action breaking diplomatic relations with the United States. He was pleased to remove the us on the chartered plane, and I believe on balance for them to leave the tense anti-American atmosphere which had developed during the crisis between Arabs and Israel.

Signed: *Lee F. Dinsmore*
Lee F. Dinsmore
Chargé d'Affaires, a.i.

Figures 3-6. Jim Wisbey often wrote of his time in Yemen, with articles published in notable newspapers including the Sydney Morning Herald.

We were in Yemen for nearly two years and then we took a slow trip home.

Basically, Dad was looking to take another position with the United Nations. We were in Ethiopia for a while and then we went on to New Delhi in India where again, we had an extended stay.

After that, we then went from New Delhi to Singapore and then Singapore back to Australia. So we left when I was four or five and I got back to Australia when I was around 11. At the time, because there was no other English speaking children in Sana'a, we learned Arabic quite fluently and by the time we came back to Australia, our Arabic was frankly better than our English because as kids, you learn languages very quickly and that's the language that we learnt. The only English we used to hear was from talking to our parents and from listening to the BBC World Service and the Voice of America.



Figure 7. Wisbey Dental dominated the x-ray film processing market with Velopex automated processors and chemistry in the days before digital. Even today, sales are surprisingly strong.



Figure 8. Aseptic portable dental equipment is another area where Wisbey Dental has done well, supplying to the military, humanitarian and domiciliary care sectors.



Figure 9. After landing a deal with Shaver Shop, Wisbey Dental began importing the JETPIK product range.



Figures 10-11. Handpieces and burs focussed on oral surgery continue to be a focus for Wisbey Dental.



Figure 12. The Aseptic range also includes portable, fully autonomous dental carts - just plug into the power.

So that was the only exposure we had to the outside world, which meant that by the time we came back to Australia as nearly teenagers, we were kind of very different. We hadn't been brought up with the other kids and we didn't know anything about rugby or Aussie Rules or the Australian lifestyle, although we thought we were very Aussie. In the playground, I'd speak Arabic to my sisters and we were called the Arab kids and even though we were

absolutely 100% dinky-di Australians, it was kind of a strange transition when we came back home.

We went to live in Albury when we arrived back because that's where my grandparents lived and we went to Albury Primary School for a short time. Dad went to Sydney and worked as a radiographer. But he was also interested in getting involved in the commercial side of the medical and pharmaceutical business.

He worked with a company called Richardson-Merrell for five years and he became a director of that company involved in sales and development of their products. He then moved across to the Swedish company, Astra Pharmaceuticals. In those days, Astra was a strongly emerging Swedish juggernaut that set up in Australia. It was very forward thinking and they were the leaders in many product groups that included dental anaesthetics.

The very first studies of anaesthesia in Australia were done with Professor George Gow-Gates, who wrote the thesis on mandibular block anaesthesia and in the foreword of his own thesis, he thanks Dad for the work that he did in helping him reach the conclusions that he did. So Dad was with Astra for over 10 years and by the time he'd finished, he was a director of the dental division and the anaesthetics division.

But he'd identified an opportunity to get involved in the dental world. As a result, he and Mum's initial foray was to get involved in oral surgery. So they were importing oral surgical instruments and products from England and Germany. It was while Dad was on a visit to the U.K. that he discovered a fantastic new machine called the Velopex x-ray film processor, which was the first x-ray film processor dedicated to the dental world.

Until that time, there'd been nothing really for dental in the x-ray world, but as a radiographer, Dad saw the potential for that and was able to secure distribution rights and bring it to Australia. Over the intervening years, we became market leaders in dental x-ray film processing technology in Australia and New Zealand. To this day, we still import container loads of chemicals for the processors that we still have out in the market today.

Whilst the advent of digital technology has taken over that world, there are still many automatic processors out there and we're still supplying chemistry to support them.

Surprisingly, we also still sell x-ray film processors. It's a market that we still service and do well with. But over the years, we've had to evolve and change and move into other product areas.

My background, after I finished schooling in Sydney, was firstly two years with the Bank of New South Wales, a year at Pymble and a year at St. Ives. Then I left the bank and I joined an architectural hardware company in Sydney. I did three years in Sydney and then they transferred me to Adelaide.

I was about 20, 21 and I was the assistant sales manager in South Australia. Then I moved from that company to a German manufacturer of more sophisticated equipment in the same field. That company was establishing itself in

Australia. So I came to Melbourne for about six months and then I spent nearly a year setting up the branch in Sydney as the regional manager for that operation. It was after that time that I saw an opportunity to take up a position working for Unilever in the South Pacific.

So I went to live in Papua New Guinea as the regional sales and marketing director for Unilever, based in Port Moresby. I ran Melanesia initially, which included Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia. My



Vale James Owen Wisbey
28.07.1930 - 30.11.2019
May he Rest In Peace

job involved travelling 11 months out of 12 to all the different cities, towns and regions throughout that area to represent Unilever. We were supplying container loads of OMO from London and tinned Margarine from Holland and all other kinds of products from around the world. I stayed for almost five years in Papua New Guinea and then came back to Australia and joined the Solomon Islands Consulate. They had a trading office in Australia and I was working with them for some time, representing them in the Pacific, again travelling back up mainly to the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu and areas that I knew from before. After that, I came back and joined the family business in about 1989.

Mum and Dad started the business in 1979 and I joined in 1989. When I first joined, we were expanding into other product areas. About five years later, we bought our premises at Thornleigh.

By that time, our product portfolio had expanded from oral surgical and x-ray technology products into things like portable dental equipment, burs, handpieces and other products such as static dental units and dental chairs. So basically small and large dental equipment. And that's what we've grown towards today.

I met my wife, Arunya, when I came back from Papua New Guinea in 1989 and we were married in 1991.

My 2IC, Matthew Cowmeadow, joined our company 20 years ago. He came to us from completely outside the dental and the commercial world. He had no experience in business, but he came from a good family. He's a very honest, loyal and hardworking fellow and he's been with us now for 20 years. He's now our technical director and as such, he can take anything we have apart and put it back together again. To his own credit, he's come forward massively. We value what he does and he's like part of the family.

Mum and Dad retired 10 years ago now. And sadly, my mother passed in 2015 and my father survives to this day. He's now 89. He's in nursing care and although he's not well, he's still with us.

This year we celebrate 40 years. There's very few small, family held Australian owned dental companies left these days. We succeed because we care for our customers and we're very focused upon delivering service. Our company motto is "knowledge, passion, service" and we stand by those tenets as best we can every day. We look after our customers. Our family name rests on our service and our delivery of our product. So we make sure that whatever we sell, whatever we do, we do it properly and we make sure that the prime focus is on customer satisfaction.

The very next day after recording this interview, I saw a missed call from Greg on my phone. It was unusual for a Saturday, so I called Greg back. He let me know that his Dad, Jim, had just passed away. His funeral was full of family and friends and was a celebration of the end of a life filled with adventure.