

NSW TISSUE BANK NEWSLETTER

October 2025

WELCOME FROM CON



**‘Keep your face to the sunshine and you cannot see a shadow.’
Helen Keller**

I have worked in eye and tissue banking for 22 years, beginning in February 2003 as Production Manager of the Lions NSW Eye Bank. As a newly graduated ophthalmologist, I knew little about the donation service. However, under the mentorship of Prof. Billson and Prof. Kathy McClellan, I learned the vital principles of ensuring the safety and quality of donated tissue. Today, as Medical Director, I am on call 24/7 to support our 26 staff in performing their sight-saving work.

Every day brings new challenges, but in my opinion, the NSW Tissue Bank staff are among the most dedicated, skilled, and compassionate health workers in the state. They support grieving families who choose to give the gift of sight, offering hope in difficult times. We are always humbled by the generosity and love shown by our donors and families, and ensure their gift is treated with the utmost care and finds a new home in a recipient hoping to see again.

Eye and tissue banking has its challenges, but as Helen Keller said, these are only “transient shadows.” By focusing on the sunshine, we continue to move forward and fulfil our mission to serve the community.

Assoc. Prof Constantinos Petsoglou MBBS, MMED(ClinEpi), FRANZCO

Speciality of Clinical Ophthalmology, Save Sight Institute, University of Sydney, Cornea Specialist, Sydney Eye Hospital, Focus Eye Centre, Royal Darwin and Bowral District Hospital, Medical Director, NSW Tissue Bank, Sydney Eye Hospital, Visiting Senior Lecturer: Otago Medical School and UNSW Optometry School

We at the NSW Tissue Bank would like to acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, the traditional owners of the land on which we base our work, and acknowledge Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia, and their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.



RECIPIENT STORY

ARTIST, BUSINESS OWNER, AND SEEING THE WORLD THROUGH DIFFERENT EYES: JOEL JENSEN

When Joel Jensen was born, his parents were overjoyed to welcome their baby boy. But they soon discovered that Joel had unique challenges. His left eye was clouded with an electric blue hue, and *both* his eyes had no iris. Doctors quickly diagnosed him with Peters Anomaly and Sporadic Aniridia, rare eye conditions that would shape his life.

Joel's mum, Tash, never imagined she would have a son with such severe vision impairment. 'I didn't expect to have a child with a disability, I went into hospital thinking I would leave a few days later,' she says, reflecting on the shock of Joel's diagnosis.

But at just two weeks old, Joel was transferred from Wagga Wagga to the Children's Hospital Westmead, where he underwent a life-changing corneal transplant and spent weeks recovering. The surgery was only the beginning of a long journey for Joel and his family.

For years, Joel's parents faced the emotional and financial strain of caring for him. Each week, they spent over \$300 on eye drops necessary for his transplant to remain successful, a cost that added up to more than \$15,000 a year. This went on for three years — an enormous financial burden for any family. 'We were living from week to week; there were a lot of Vegemite sandwiches,' says Tash. 'But we did what we had to do. There was no choice but to keep going.'



Despite the relentless weekly trips to Sydney for check-ups and the constant financial pressure, Tash and her husband remained

committed to Joel's eyes. Their love and determination to give Joel the best chance at a future were unwavering. 'It was exhausting, but we did it,' Tash says. 'Every week, every appointment, every drop — it was all worth it.'

Now 25, Joel is a thriving artist and the proud owner of his own art studio in Wagga Wagga. What started as sketching with his mobile phone to magnify details up close has grown into a career fuelled by his passion for colour and vintage objects. His artwork, shaped by his unique perspective, speaks volumes about his resilience and creativity. 'It's like looking through a thick fog,' Joel explains of how he sees the world. His vision may be different, but it hasn't stopped him from seeing beauty in everything around him.

Tash, who never expected to have a vision-impaired son, has embraced Joel's world with love and support. 'When he was a boy, I would wear bright colours so he could see me in a crowd, or know when I was leaving the room,' she says.

Despite the challenges, Joel has never seen himself as limited. Instead, he's found other ways to thrive — whether through his art or his passion for lawn bowls. He now competes in blind and low-vision tournaments in Australia, with dreams of joining the national team.

Joel's message to those considering donation is simple: 'Eye donation gave me a future. A better one, full of opportunity.'



Photo: Kamila Maciejewska - Unsplash

EYE AND TISSUE SPOTLIGHT WEEK

OUR MOST SUCCESSFUL YEAR YET

Eye and Tissue Spotlight Week was held from 8 – 12 September 2025, and this year, we launched a refreshed media approach that delivered our most successful results to date.

Our Media and Communications Officer, Reagan Ruppell, secured more than 17 pieces of media coverage throughout the week – shining a light on the incredible impact of eye and tissue donation across the state.

Most notably, stories were featured on **Weekend TODAY**, **7News Riverina**, and **QNews**. Additional coverage of tissue recipients appeared in **Region Riverina**, **The Wagga Wagga Daily Advertiser**, and the **Blue Mountains Gazette**.

Thanks to this refreshed approach, Eye and Tissue Spotlight Week 2025 reached a wider audience than ever before, helping to raise awareness and spark important conversations about eye and tissue donation.

Here's a snapshot of some of the coverage:



QNEWS

Heart valve recipient Gregory Provenzano's inspiring story



7News Riverina

Corneal recipient Joel Jensen's story



Weekend TODAY

Corneal recipient Ralph Kerle's reunion with Dr Lyon Robinson

OUR STAFF

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INTRODUCING

LILLIAN ROWLAND

Lillian Rowland joined our team as Coordinator on 3 April, bringing experience from the optical industry as a dispenser.



Her friendly, hardworking nature has made her an excellent fit for the NSW Tissue Bank team. Lillian is eager to learn, communicates clearly, responds well to feedback, and is progressing strongly through her training. She has begun on-call duties and is in the final stage of training for eye tissue allocation and distribution.

Q What attracted you to apply for a Tissue Donor Coordinator role?

A The Tissue Donor Coordinator role came to me by serendipity. While taking a year off from a stressful dentistry degree, I learned my job might be cut. That night, I found this position, a perfect fit where I could apply my medical science knowledge to support a worthy cause. The next day, I was told my job was safe, but this was the only role I applied for, and to my surprise, I got it.

Q What do you find the most challenging and the most rewarding aspects of the role?

A The conversations with the families of the deceased. We call people on one of the worst days of their lives, which can be daunting because you never know how they will respond. There is also a lot of pressure to get everything right, because any mistake could make an already difficult time even harder for them. But when a family finds comfort in knowing their loved one's passing could help restore someone's sight, it is incredibly rewarding.

Q Your super-power of choice and why?

A Teleportation. Missing the morning commute? Come on, it's a no-brainer.

Q Dog, cat or plant person?

A I think dogs are fabulous and I'll say hi to each one I see, but I'm a cat person through and through. Plants and I don't get along; I had two that were flourishing, but when I moved, I completely forgot they existed, so now they are very dead.

Q What's one thing that people might be surprised to learn about you?

A When I was sixteen, I hiked an active volcano in New Zealand with my mother. Neither of us were outdoorsy or in fantastic shape, and we were mostly there for a Lord of the Rings tour. Somehow, we made it back just in time for the bus driver's second trip of the day, or Search & Rescue would have been called to find us.

RETIREMENT ANNOUNCEMENT:

RAJ DEVASAHAYAM

Laboratory Manager



Raj began his career in 1987 at Sydney Hospital and quickly became a central figure in eye banking. After the Eye Bank closed in 1995, he was the only staff member retained and appointed Laboratory Manager. He has driven major innovations, including introducing confocal microscopy in 2003, organ culture storage for corneas in 2011, which eliminated a five-year waitlist, and expanding the NSW Tissue Bank's offerings to include pre-cut corneas, amniotic membrane, and split-skin products.

Raj helped establish eye banks in Ho Chi Minh City and Myanmar, increasing the annual number of transplants from 30 to over 300. A respected educator and researcher, he has authored more than ten widely cited publications.

Raj's contribution to NSW Health and eye banking is immense. As he retires, we thank him deeply for his dedication, innovation, and leadership – and wish him a fulfilling next chapter.

STAFF SPOTLIGHT:

SARAH NGUYEN

Quality Assurance Manager

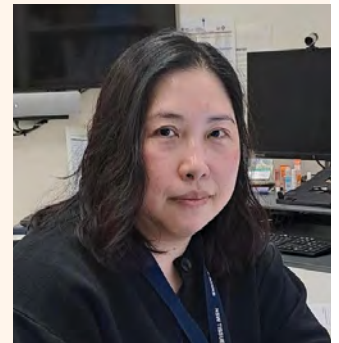
Sarah Nguyen joined the NSW Tissue Bank in 2021 as Quality Assurance Manager – though she'll tell you she "came here by accident. What was meant to be a short-term gig quickly turned into a long-term dream: building and embedding the Quality Management System (QMS) that underpins everything the Tissue Bank does.

With nearly two decades of experience at GSK plc in validation and compliance, Sarah's commitment to Good Manufacturing Practice is clear. She often reminds the team that "without quality assurance, you have nothing" and that "quality is everyone's responsibility." After a brief hiatus in 2021, she returned and has been leading a small but mighty team of four alongside her manager, Vanessa.

Outside work, Sarah is a proud mum to Elly and Paige, speaks Vietnamese, Cantonese, and English, and is a self-confessed non-cook with a love of Uber Eats and kimchi stew. She starts her mornings at 6:30 am with a Coke Zero. When she's not at work, you might find Sarah decorating sugar cookies for children's parties or remembering the time she spotted then Health Minister Brad Hazzard giving a talk in the Claffey Auditorium in 2023.

Next August, Sarah will celebrate five years at the Tissue Bank.

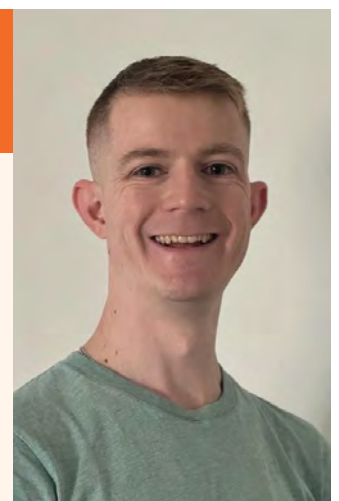
We thank her for keeping quality at the heart of everything we do.



FAREWELL TIM MYCHAEAL

Since the last edition, we have farewelled Tim Mychael, Procurement & Production Scientist. As a new father, Tim chose to prioritise his family as the demands of donation work became challenging. His departure is a reminder that while donation is a wonderful and life-enhancing gift, it can be emotionally demanding for those who caretake the process. Tim left us with a reflection:

**"Act as if what you do will make a difference. It does."
William James, philosopher and psychologist.**



LEADERSHIP NEWS

NATIONAL EYE & TISSUE DATA WORKING GROUP

Australia's Eye and Tissue Banks are collaborating to develop a national eye and tissue dataset. Leading the initiative are:

- **Hal Boronovskis** (CEO, PlusLife –Western Australia),
- **Kelsey Considine** (A/Director, Queensland Tissue Bank),
- **Brendan Sullivan** (Head, Donor Tissue Bank of Victoria) and
- **Christopher Van Diemen** (Chair – Biotherapeutics Association of Australasia [BAA]).

Supported by **Kelly Marshall** at ANZDATA and the Eye and Tissue Advisory Committee (ETAC), their combined expertise provides a strong foundation for this ambitious project.

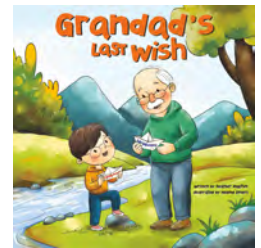
Historically, differences in governance and reporting have made it difficult to capture a true picture of national activity. By working together, banks can address data gaps, develop consistent definitions, and enable high-quality reporting. The project follows a three-phase approach to build data integrity and mature collective data capability, ensuring representation from the smallest eye banks to the largest multi-tissue banks. Phase 1 is complete, and the detailed work underway is already providing a clearer view of activity and guiding discussions on future needs.

What makes this initiative exciting is the shared spirit behind it. Across the country, tissue banks are collaborating to create insights no single service could achieve alone. Over the next year, this work will lay the foundation for expanded reporting and a complete national dataset, supporting better outcomes for donors, recipients, and patients nationwide.

CHILDREN'S BOOK 'GRANDAD'S LAST WISH' SHEDS LIGHT ON EYE DONATION

A new children's book written by Head of the Victorian Lions Eye Donation Service, Dr Heather Machin, is aiming to break down the barriers for eye donation.

Through the story of Kevin and his grandad, it gently helps children and their families understand eye donation, making it easier to discuss this sensitive topic while highlighting the positive impact donation can have on others. A portion of each sale supports the Lions Eye Donation Service.



The book is available for purchase [here](#).

UPCOMING NSW EVENTS



15 Nov 2025	Sydney Service of Remembrance
15 Nov 2025	Newcastle Service of Remembrance
16 Nov 2025	Thank You Day
3-4 Mar 2026	3rd National Combined Eye & Tissue Bank Conference (EBAANZ & BAA), Art Gallery of NSW Book here

See more details here: [Events](#) | [DonateLife](#)

Thank you for being part of our journey to transform lives through tissue donation.
Warm wishes,

The NSW Tissue Bank Team



Health
NSW Organ & Tissue
Donation Service

Incorporating:
NSW Bone Bank
Lions NSW Eye Bank
Australian Ocular Biobank

