

Individuals and Institutions in the History of Medicine

PETER WINTERTON
PRESIDENT, AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY OF THE
HISTORY OF MEDICINE

This was the theme of the 6th Biennial Conference of the Australian Society of the History of Medicine (ASHM) held in the Faculty of Nursing in, the University of Sydney. In only twenty years ASHM has now produced six world class conferences with international speakers and many local speakers of national and international reputation. The organising committee was chaired by Dr Judith Godden, an historian in the Faculty of Nursing. Dr Godden and her committee arranged a programme that reflected well the broadly based membership of ASHM.

The Conference was officially opened by the Dean of the Faculty of Nursing, Professor Jocayln Lawler. The opening keynote address, by Professor John Burnham, Professor of History and Psychiatry at the Ohio State University, led the conference to an excellent start. His address *A History of Medical Practitioners and Historians as Writers of Medical History* was a review of medical history from the earliest historians such as Daniel Le Clerc (1652-1728) until the modern day. He noted that currently there are many diverse groups who are interested in the history of medicine for many different reasons. He concluded that 'medical historians need all the help they can get'. Burnham has recently published on this subject in *Medical History*,

Supplement No.18 "How the Idea of Profession Changed the Writing of Medical History." The audience exhibited a diverse interest in the subject of medical history.

Three concurrent sessions were held on the first session of the conference covering a diverse group of subjects. Subjects ranged from Professor Harold Attwood's reflections on the series *Occasional Papers of the History of Medicine Australia* (OPMHA) of which he is the founding editor, to biographical studies of Miguel Servetus, John Singleton, Marsilio Ficino, Havelock Ellis and Contessa Diamantina Roma, Lady Bowen. Owen Powell discussed the value of a medical degree in translating Galen, and Brian Fotheringham the significance of the unicorn in medicine.

The second day of the Conference opened with a beautifully delivered passionate address by Professor Christopher Maggs, Professor of Nursing at Staffordshire University. The topic was *The Re-Casualisation of the Nursing labour Force at the End of the Twentieth century: A Comparison at the end of the Nineteenth*. Professor Maggs argued that at the end of the nineteenth century nurses were disciplined, obedient, educated women at the service of delivering health care. He hopes that at the end of the twentieth century, when he might need nursing services, that evidence-based medicine will help him and others in need to receive the same high standard.

Four parallel sessions gave delegates a feast to choose from. The areas of interest covered were Health Society and Medicine at the turn of the century, Psychiatric Records and Patient's Voices, Ethical issues in Twentieth Century Medicine and Traditions and Innovations. Dr Anders Kallgard of Sweden, a regular delegate at ASHM conferences, discussed Samuel Odmann's condition and compared it to the twentieth century's Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. Dr Daniela Angetter from the Institute for the History of Medicine in Vienna presented an excellent paper on the findings of the Pernkopf Commission in Vienna. This was a commission established to examine the source of bodies used by the Institute of Anatomy in Vienna Medical School during the Nazi period, when Eduard Pernkopf was Professor of Anatomy, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and Rector of the University. Angetter concluded that over 1300 bodies had been used by the Institute of Anatomy during this period which had come from the Nazi execution Chamber in Vienna. Seven of the victims were Jewish, the remainder were so-called criminals. Lisa Parker's paper also focused on matters anatomical when she examined the practice of dissection at Australian universities, relating that there are

now few if any medical schools where dissection is carried out by students. The anatomical theme continued with Dr Mimi Cazot's paper discussed *What Can We Learn from Anatomical Illustrations beside Anatomy?* Professor Randall Albury analysed *Confessional Anatomy in the Counter-Reformation: Self Dissecting Anatomical Illustrations in the 17th century*.

The afternoon keynote address on the second day of the Conference was delivered by Victoria Harden, Historian of the US National Institutes of Health and Director of the De Witt Stetten, Jr. Museum of Medical Research and Caroline Hannaway past editor of *The Bulletin of the History of Medicine*. They presented a comprehensive review of *The AIDS History Project at the National Institutes of Health*. The afternoon sessions on the second day offered delegates much choice. Areas that received attention were Public History and the History of Medicine. Dr McCalman's paper on the Writing of the History of the Women's Hospital in Melbourne was a highlight of this section. Dr Derek Dow from Auckland addressed the vexing problem of commissioned Historians. The always important subject of the history of infectious diseases was well covered with papers on Infantile Diarrhoeal Mortality by Prof John Walker-Smith. Professor Martensen explored the attitude of physicians towards scientific knowledge at the end of the nineteenth century. Further papers on infectious disease included Professor Cossart's paper on *The London Fever Hospital* and Professor Barry Smith's paper *Comprehending Diphtheria* in Australia. Claire Hooker outlined the pivotal role that diphtheria had in the evolution of the germ theory of infectious disease and its central role in public health policy in Australia. Interestingly, this disease features prominently in the early career of Dr J. H. L. Cumpston, an early champion of medical history and humanities in medicine in this country. It is easy to forget the importance of this contagious disease in the antibiotic era. Such is not the case in Russia today where diphtheria is a major cause of death. Dr Di Tibbits gave the conference an insight into Frank Forster, one of ASHM's founding fathers, by reviewing his collection of books and instruments, now housed in the Royal Australian College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Melbourne. Running concurrently with all this was a fascinating section on women practitioners and patients, focusing on the history of childbirth.

Friday morning's Plenary was delivered by Megan Hicks, Curator of Health and Medicine at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney. Her central theme was the importance of bringing the subject of medical history to the public. The recent travelling exhibition on the History of Contraception was discussed. The interaction between the exhibit

and the public was of particular interest, as it in itself became part of the exhibition. For many visitors to the exhibition it was the first time that they had the opportunity of discussing this private and intimate part of life. Some of the West Australian delegates were dismayed to learn that the exhibition had unbeknown to them been in Western Australia, highlighting once again that even the best of exhibitions need extensive promotion if they are to achieve their aim. The remainder of Friday was a feast of medical history. Nursing history received considerable attention with local careers such as Frances Gillam Holden received the attention of Sue Forsyth. Florence did not escape the attention of Dr Glen Mitchell.

Ancient medical practice was an interesting subject. Dr Einar Berle a regular Norwegian delegate at ASHM conferences, spoke of ancient Greece, Dr Burrell on *The Impact of Arabic Medicine on Traditional Indian Medicine*. Dr David Johnson had spoken earlier in the conference on Imhotep. Dr Gael Phillips, a pathologist from Brisbane, reviewed the use of the microscope in the nineteenth century while Professor Ken Kirkby reviewed in as always lucid detail the establishment of asylums in colonial Victoria. Dr George Biro reminded us all of the frail health of our political leaders at times when their nation needed them most, referring particularly to Churchill, Curtin and Roosevelt. First time visitors to Sydney would have felt differently about that Sydney landmark the harbour bridge after listening to Michael Tyquin's paper *Death and Accidents in Building the Sydney Harbour Bridge*.

The final plenary address was delivered by the editor of *Health and History*, Associate Professor Warwick Anderson. He explored alternate views on the history of psychiatry, drawing on a vast corpus of knowledge that he has been attained over many years of research. The audience unfortunately had been thinned out by it being the last morning of the conference and the effects of the splendid Conference dinner the evening before in the Neo-Gothic MacLaurin Hall of Sydney University. The final sessions were devoted to the Medical Profession in the Twentieth Century, Notable Individuals in Health, Society and Medicine at the Turn of the Century, Medicine and Cultures and a selection of presentations to take a longer view of medicine. I reviewed the attitude of the medical profession to Jewish medical migration as a response to the events of Nazi Europe, Dr Diana Wyndham reviewed the life of Dr Norman Haire, a prominent ABC broadcaster in his day. Dr Roland Petchey's paper, one of the last on the programme, was worth the wait when he reviewed the life of Joseph Silver Collings *A Man Ahead of his Times*. Other biographical sketches presented during

the conference included Peter Tyler's *Frank Tidswell*, Dr Edwin Nye's *Ronal Ross Malariologist and Polymath*, Dr Ben Hanemann's *Thomas Meridith Sheridan*, Professor Ross Holland's *Hubert Ingham Clements*, Graham Edwards' *Major General Richardson*, Dr John Thearle's *Dr William Hobbs*, and Linda Bryder's *Plunket as a New Zealand Icon*.

In reviewing the conference I have attempted to record the diversity of subject matter presented reflecting Professor Burnham's opening remarks on the diversity of people interested in the history of medicine and health care. I have not endeavoured to mention every paper presented at the conference.

The future of the Australian Society of the History of Medicine depends on this broad-based interest in the history of medicine. The AGM which followed the conference confirmed the key decisions to embrace the world wide web into the society's functioning and the decision to locate the secretariat of the Society in Melbourne on a permanent basis. The matter of The Proceedings of the conferences of the our society was resolved by universal affirmation. In future conferences proceedings will be two page extracts. This will allow the submission of papers to *Health and History* and other learned journals on the completion of conferences of the Australian Society of the History of Medicine. This change in policy will bring to an end the series OPMHA. The members wished Dr Brain Fotheringham every success in planning the 7th Biennial Conference to be held in Adelaide in April 2001. The 8th Biennial Conference in Melbourne will coincide with the Golden Jubilee of the Medical History Society of Victoria in 2003.

Perth