

Compassion and courage: Australian doctors and dentists in the Great War

Jacqueline Healy, Heather Sheard and Tony Bartone

Introduction

Jacqueline Healy

The centenary of Anzac—the engagement of Australian and New Zealand troops in World War I—will be commemorated broadly by many institutions and in many forms between 2014 and 2018. An important part of the University of Melbourne's program of events is the exhibition *Compassion and courage: Australian doctors and dentists in the Great War*, which, together with a substantial catalogue, opens up fresh perspectives on the effects of the war on the Australian community, through the work of the medical and dental professions. Contributors to the catalogue include prominent members of the medical and dental professions, historians, and relatives of individuals who played important roles in the war effort.

War has always been a catalyst for change in the fields of medicine and dentistry. Out of the chaos created by conflict comes the need for innovation to deal with its consequences. World War I was not like any war that had been fought before. It brought new forms of destructive technology: machine guns, artillery and poisonous gas, as well as a significantly different terrain for warfare: the trenches. This created diverse and complex

challenges concerning infectious disease, treatment of wounds, psychological trauma and hygiene. The health professions responded with compassion and courage.

Starting with the landing at Gallipoli, Australian medical professionals cared for the sick and the wounded under extremely difficult conditions: under fire on the battlefield; in casualty clearing stations close to the front lines; and in large hospitals in Egypt, France and England. The Australian Army Medical Service began as an adjunct to Britain's Royal Army Medical Corps but by 1918 had become an independent entity.

Surprisingly, the Australian armed services initially had no dental corps—medical units had to deal with dental problems. Many dentists enlisted but their skills were not used. The first dentist to be formally attached to a medical unit was John Henderson, a fourth-year medical student deployed with the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force in the Pacific in 1915. He was to die at Pozières in 1916. Dentists were later to play a crucial role as oral and maxillofacial surgeons at Sidcup, England, restoring the faces of servicemen severely disfigured by explosions or gunfire. By 1918 the role of dentists in maintaining

the health and wellbeing of troops was integrated into the wider health services provided to the military.

Using personal histories, this exhibition and publication explore the role of Australian medical professionals during World War I and the private and professional challenges they faced, focusing particularly on students, staff and alumni of the University of Melbourne. At a time of great social and technological revolution and discovery, Australians were at the forefront.

The exhibition draws on the collections of the Harry Brookes Allen Museum of Anatomy and Pathology, the Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum, the Medical History Museum, several other University of Melbourne collections, as well as the Australian War Memorial, other institutions and private lenders. Of particular interest is material from the Australian Medical Association Archive (now in the Medical History Museum), which has not been seen before—this includes trench maps used by Dr B.W. Cohen in France and Belgium and the case notes of Dr Helen Sexton from the hospital she set up in Paris.

Although both the Australian and the British armed forces refused to employ women doctors, 16 Australian women doctors travelled to Britain

Below: Dr Mary Clementina De Garis and Serbian colonel at Ostrovo in Serbia, photograph, c. 1917–18. TD1734, Glasgow City Archives.

Right [Algermon] Darge, 'The Soldier's Photographers', Dr Gordon Clunes McKay Mathison, 1914, photograph, 22.6 × 11.8 cm. MHM00322, gift of Department of Physiology, University of Melbourne, 1968, Medical History Museum, University of Melbourne.



to offer their services. Denied enlistment, they worked instead in various voluntary and paid positions, often with Allied governments and organisations such as the Scottish Women's Hospitals and Red Cross. The exhibition examines their contribution, with particular focus on Dr Mary De Garis (1881–1963) (pictured above), who was awarded the Serbian Order of St Sava, and Major Helen Sexton (1862–1950), surgeon, one of the first seven women to study medicine at the University of Melbourne.

The loss of medical expertise was extensive. Captain Gordon Clunes McKay Mathison (1883–1915) landed at Gallipoli as a battalion doctor on the original Anzac Day; in the same week he was appointed as the inaugural director of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute. This brilliant scientist (pictured right) was fatally wounded on 9 May 1915.

Many students, alumni and staff of Melbourne Medical School enlisted. In fact, the medical students' magazine *Speculum* in 1915 included a section headed 'Notes from the front'. However, due to the extent of casualties and the need for fully qualified doctors at the front and at home, Professor Harry Brookes Allen encouraged students to finish their courses before enlisting. The medical course at the University of Melbourne was also reduced in length.

In June 1917 *Speculum* published a record of the war service of the Victorian Branch of the medical profession. It reported that 219 doctors were still on active service, 82 had returned from the front, and 19 had been killed on service. These 320 doctors included 79 new graduates, the other 241 coming from the general body of medical practitioners in Victoria. Thus, 40 per cent of the 'medical men' in the state volunteered. Those not accepted



for active service worked at base hospitals for the Australian Army Medical Corps Reserve.

In the centenary of Anzac, this exhibition opens up fresh insights into the work of Australian doctors and dentists in the Great War. Even more importantly, it acknowledges the contribution and sacrifice of many and their legacy of compassion and courage. The following excerpts from the exhibition catalogue tell stories of two intriguing items from the Australian Medical Association Archive.

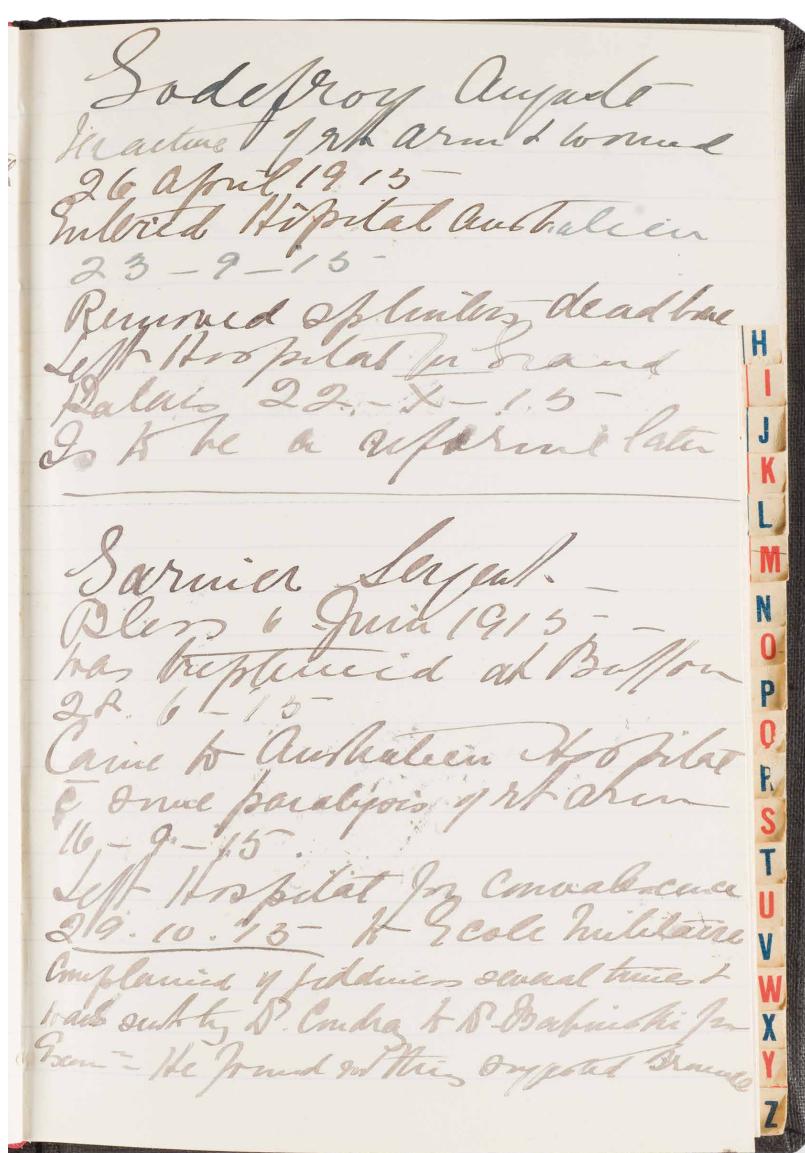
Helen H.M. Sexton, 'Notes of cases in Hôpital Australien de Paris, 46 Rue du Dr Blanche, Auteuil, Paris XVI', 1915, ink and print on paper, 21.0×14.5 cm. MHMA2189.1, presented to the Australian Medical Association in 1974 by Dr O'Sullivan of Ballarat, who received it from Roz Watt; Australian Medical Association Archive, Medical History Museum, University of Melbourne.

Dr Helen Sexton's casebook

Heather Sheard

When Helen Sexton's request to enlist with the Royal Army Medical Corps in the first weeks of World War I was denied, she simply opened her own hospital. Her casebook notes were written between July and December 1915 at her Hôpital Australien de Paris, established in a villa on the edge of the Auteuil racetrack. The treatment notes of French soldiers generally included their rank, unit and the battle in which they had been wounded or had become ill. Sometimes their length of service and family details were also recorded; Sexton evidently had a good grasp of the French language. The casebook also indicates that soldiers were moved between different hospitals, sometimes several times, according to the nature and severity of their wounds and complications and the number of beds available. Most commonly, patients were moved between the Hôpital Australien and the Buffon Military Hospital, 4 kilometres away across the Seine.

The casebook is a rare window into the complexity and challenges of World War I military medicine. Jean Badaud, admitted on 1 November, required further wound incisions to remove embedded shreds of uniform and half a bomb screw from his leg.



Unfortunately no X-ray machine was available that day. After six months in the trenches at Verdun, Edouard Deracuias had contracted typhoid and been admitted to Buffon in May. In July he was transferred to the Hôpital Australien with a post-typhoid complication, alveolar periostitis, causing severe pain in the jaw and requiring immediate incision and removal of dead bone and teeth. Julien Godot had a shrapnel wound to the sacrum joint, causing paralysis in his right leg and urine retention. He was 22 years old and had been wounded three times. Maurice Sergent's toes were gangrenous; four were amputated on his admission on 3 November. Automobile accidents, pneumonia, tuberculosis and syphilis cases were also recorded. The war demanded a comprehensive set of medical skills and Dr Helen Sexton provided hers willingly.

Medical care at the front line

Tony Bartone

Basil Walter Cohen, MB, was appointed to the Royal Army Medical Corps in 'the Rank of Lieutenant in Our Land Forces' from 'the sixth day of April 1915'. His commission was signed on 25 May 1915, and he would have received the document when he arrived in England. During World War I, medical practitioners

were immediately commissioned as officers—lieutenants or captains—and surgeons were appointed to the rank of major.

Cohen had graduated from the University of Melbourne in 1910 and was practising in Mansfield when he volunteered for the Australian Army Medical Corps. He disembarked in April 1915. Like many other Australian doctors, he received some training in England before being sent to the Western Front in July 1915. Cohen's papers on the evacuation of the wounded were given to the Australian Medical Association Archive.

As the war progressed, preparations for attacks and the organisation of treatment of the wounded improved. The document titled *Medical arrangements for collection and treatment of sick and wounded of the Division* was issued by Colonel O.R.A. Julian, AMS, ADMS, 17th Division, on 26 August 1915. It provided detailed instructions, including map references for where the dressing stations were located, the uses of local buildings and the types of equipment available, with details such as '(a) Regimental Aid Posts. / (1) Building at Cross Roads, known as the / BRASSERIE N.5.b.q2 / Extra equip: 2 wheeled stretchers / 24 blankets'.

Also in Cohen's papers are *17th Division intelligence statements*, which included extracts from captured German orders. Captain Cohen (he was promoted in April 1916) also kept the trench maps from this period, which show the British and German trenches in different colours: those south-west of St Eloi, Ypres and Hazebrouck dating from April 1915 and others from 1918. These maps were used in conjunction with the instructions, to help get the wounded to care and safety.

The personal papers of Captain Cohen give us great insight into the inspiring and dedicated work performed day after day by doctors in the trenches.

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Compassion and courage: Australian doctors and dentists in the Great War runs until 30 April 2016 at the Medical History Museum, Level 2, Brownless Biomedical Library, University of Melbourne. Opening hours are Monday to Friday 10 am to 5 pm, and Saturday 1 pm to 5 pm (during the university term).

Field Survey Battalion of the Royal Engineers,
British Army trench map: *WINGLES I.*
TRENCHES CORRECTED TO 13-9-18, 1918,
print on paper, 33.0 x 40.0 cm. MHMA1684.19,
Australian Medical Association Archive, Medical
History Museum, University of Melbourne.

