

# Strength of mind

## 125 years of women in medicine

*I wish to persuade women to  
endeavour to acquire strength,  
both of mind and body.*

Mary Wollstonecraft,  
*A vindication of the rights  
of woman*, 1792.

### Introduction

#### Jacqueline Healy

Inspired by Mary Wollstonecraft's comment, the title *Strength of mind: 125 years of women in medicine* encapsulates the struggle of women to achieve equality in education and professional life. The exhibition on display until March 2014 and the accompanying catalogue trace this journey by women in the Melbourne Medical School at the University of Melbourne through key events and individuals.

Women were admitted to Melbourne Medical School in 1887, fully 25 years after the course had commenced, but 21 years before women were entitled to vote in Victoria. Crucial to telling their stories has been material in the university's Medical History Museum Collection in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences: photographs, notebooks and personal items. For example, the student photographs are visual evidence of the increasing presence of women.



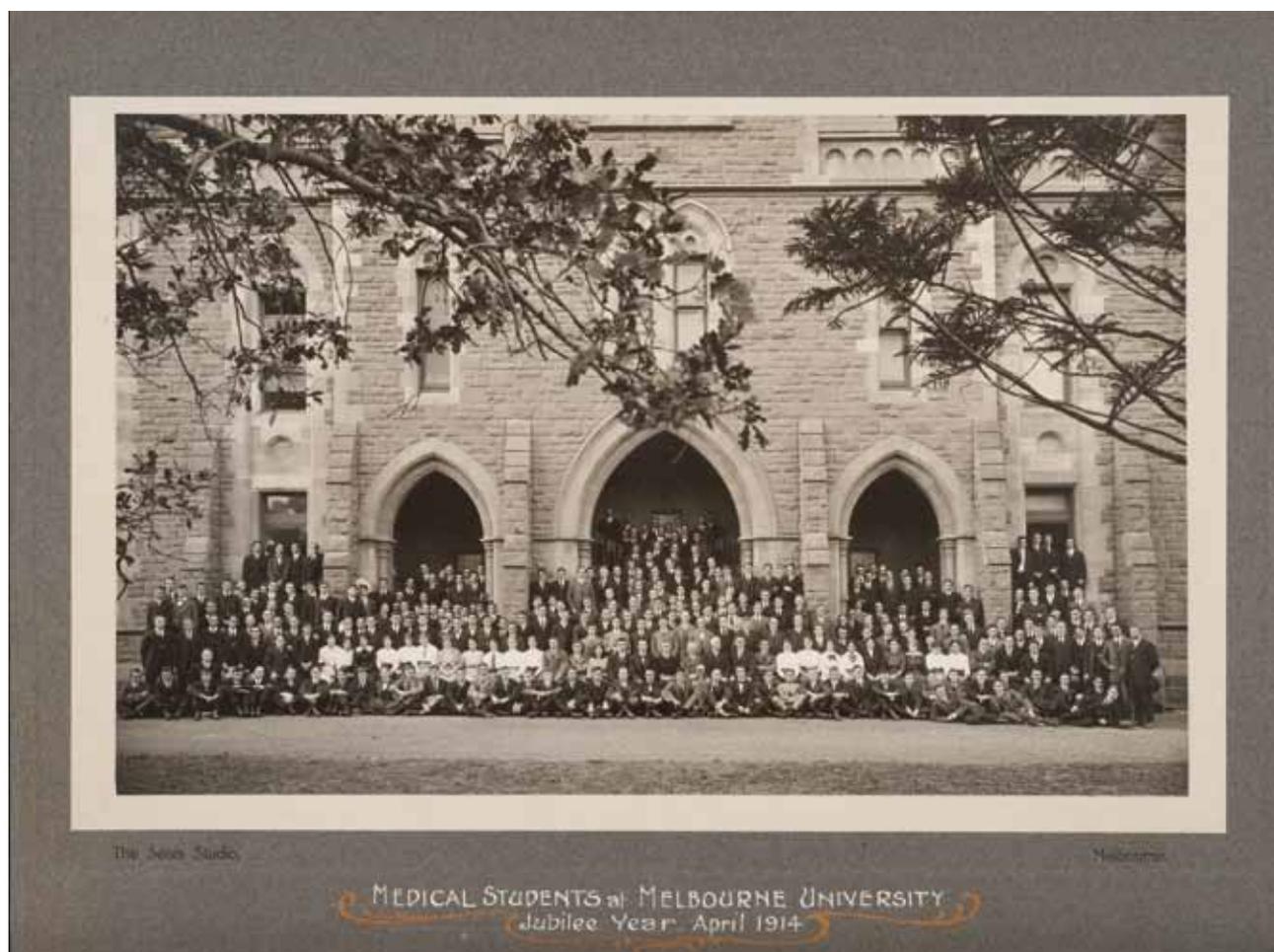
For the exhibition we also borrowed important items from the University of Melbourne Archives, major hospital archives such as St Vincent's Hospital and the Royal Women's Hospital, university college collections (Trinity College and Janet Clarke Hall) as well as community and private collections and recently collected photographs. This historical and contemporary material brings to life the achievements and challenges faced by these women.

A portrait of Lilian Alexander (1861–1934) by contemporary artist

Caroline Williams from the Trinity College Collection captures the steely determination of one of the first seven women who commenced studying medicine at Melbourne in 1887. Alexander and Helen Sexton (1862–1950), through a letter to *The Age* in January 1887, invited women interested in undertaking medicine to reply. Clara Stone, Margaret Whyte, Grace Vale and Elizabeth and Annie O'Hara responded. Led by Constance Stone, who in 1890 was the first woman to register as a doctor in Victoria (she trained in Canada), they

**Previous page:** First women students at the University of Melbourne School of Medicine, 1887, photograph, 28.0×33.0 cm. MHM02037, Medical History Museum, University of Melbourne. Left to right, with year of graduation: Helen Sexton (1892), Clara Stone (1891), Lilian Alexander (1892), Margaret Whyte (1891), Grace Vale (1894), Annie O'Hara (1894), Elizabeth O'Hara (1893).

**Below:** The Sears Studio, *Medical students at Melbourne University, jubilee year, April 1914*, 1914, photograph, 36.0×55.0 cm. MHM00448, Medical History Museum, University of Melbourne. This photograph is taken outside the 'New' Medical School built between 1884 and 1908, now known as the Elisabeth Murdoch Building.



Winifred McCubbin, *Vera Scantlebury Brown*,  
1943, oil on canvas, 40.0 x 37.0 cm.  
MHM2013.90, gift of Catherine James  
Bassett, daughter of Dr Vera Scantlebury  
Brown, 2013, Medical History Museum,  
University of Melbourne.

would go on to establish the Queen Victoria Hospital in 1896. This was the first hospital established in Australia for the care of women that was managed and staffed by women, and one of only three internationally. These attributes have been evident in many women in medicine over the last 125 years as they have contributed to all aspects of medical practice and research. Women now comprise over 50 per cent of medical graduates at Melbourne. Our exhibition and publication celebrate the achievements of women graduates of Melbourne Medical School from 1887 to now.

Melbourne Medical School was established in 1862. Vice-chancellor A.C. Brownless instigated a five-year course, with standards that more than equalled those of any medical school in Britain. However, in 1879 Brownless opposed the motion to admit women to the University of Melbourne, and in 1887 opposed the admittance of women to medicine. The *Brownless memorial supplement* published in 1898 shows the extent of change over just 11 years: women are in most of the class photographs. The much-reproduced image of Professor Harry Brookes Allen lecturing in anatomy shows three women clustered together in the front row. Research by students from Cultural



Collections Projects who assisted with the development of the exhibition identified these three women as Effie Stillwell, Helen Shaw and Mary Baldwin, who all graduated MBBS in 1901.

Borrowed from a private collection, medals for service presented to Dr Mary De Garis (1881–1963) by the Serbian and British governments are proof of the contribution of an important woman graduate who commanded a medical field hospital in Serbia in World War I. They also reveal her perseverance in putting her medical training to practical use at a time when women were prohibited from enlisting in the armed forces as doctors.

Of extraordinary significance are items from the Mary Glowrey papers in the collection of the Catholic Women's League of Victoria and Wagga Wagga. Mary Glowrey graduated in 1910 with a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery, and a Doctor of Medicine in 1916. She went to India in 1920 as a medical missionary and established a major hospital and system of health care and education which still flourishes today. Last year Dr Sister Mary Glowrey entered the first stage of canonisation. The objects, letters and publications encompass local Indian remedies, correspondence

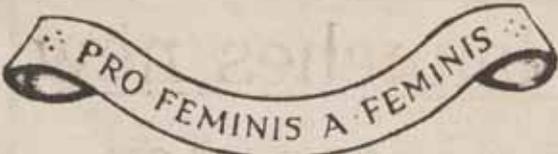
with family, photograph albums and medical papers meticulously collected by her sister. They now have the status of relics and provide remarkable insight into Glowrey's determination to receive an education.

On display in the exhibition is a recent gift to the collection of a portrait of Dr Vera Scantlebury Brown (1889–1946), donated by her daughter, Catherine James Bassett. The oil painting (reproduced on page 29) was painted by Winifred McCubbin (1893–1967), a daughter-in-law of Frederick McCubbin. The portrait was an entry in the Archibald Prize in 1943. 'Dr Vera', as she was affectionately known, was a leader in her field, putting in place the universal structure of maternal and child health services and pre-schools we still enjoy in Victoria today. Other material relating to Vera Scantlebury Brown from the University of Melbourne Archives was also in the exhibition: items relating to her contribution during World War I in London include a letter and cable from Dr Flora Murray offering her an appointment to the Endell Street Military Hospital (staffed entirely by women), coat buttons and insignia from her uniform and a photograph of her with her brother Dr George Clifford Scantlebury, both in uniform.

*Strength of mind: 125 years of women in medicine* celebrates the contribution of women in the field of medicine. More than 50 individuals and events were selected to illustrate the achievements, significant changes and diversity of experiences of women in the medical profession. Similarly, equally prominent members of the medical profession and medical historians have authored these entries. All medical practitioners featured in the publication and all authors are alumni of the Melbourne Medical School at the University of Melbourne. For example, Dr Margaret Henderson was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Medical Science last year—Professor Christine Kilpatrick, CEO of the Royal Children's Hospital, writes about her achievements. Dr Shirley Godwin, an Indigenous medical graduate, shares her story with Dr Mary Belfrage.

The stories of the alumnae of the Melbourne Medical School are enriched by these collections and will be key sources for further research in the future. Through direct engagement with collections, the exhibition and catalogue increase our understanding of the history of women in medicine and their role in society.

Dr Jacqueline Healy is curator of the Medical History Museum in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences at the University of Melbourne.

  
*The Queen Victoria Hospital motto.*

## Great doctors of the Queen Vic

# Constance Stone

**A** USTRALIA'S first woman doctor was Constance Stone. She left Melbourne in 1884 to study medicine in Philadelphia, then took out a British degree and went to the New Hospital for Women in London where she worked with Dr Elizabeth Garrett Anderson.

Back in Melbourne in 1889 she set up a practice in Collins Street. Once a week, she worked unpaid at Dr Singleton's Mission in Collingwood, where more than 16,000 patients were treated a year. Her sister Clara joined her there as soon as she graduated. They saw fifty to a hundred women in every session, and became convinced of the urgent need for a hospital run by women, for women.

In 1896 10 women graduates gathered at Constance Stone's home to make plans for setting up a hospital. Her husband, Dr Egryn Jones, offered use of the Welsh Church hall in La Trobe Street, then a poor, crowded area. Dr Clara Stone had a £2 donation



from a private patient. They decided to go ahead with it: the Victoria Hospital (later the Queen Victoria), the third hospital in the world run by women for women, was born.

Constance Stone became ill in 1900, a year after the Queen Victoria Hospital opened. She died in 1902, her life's ambition achieved.

## Victorian Medical Women's Society

### Magdalena Simonis

Dr Constance Stone, the first female doctor to practise in Australia, founded the Victorian Medical Women's Society on 22 March 1895. She was joined by Mary Page Stone, Grace Clara Stone, Lilian Alexander, Margaret Whyte, Elizabeth O'Hara, Annie O'Hara, Grace Vale and Helen Sexton. These women challenged perceptions that women were unsuitable for learning and practising medicine, and held monthly meetings in Constance Stone's East Melbourne home. The society remains active to this day and is one of the oldest organisations in the world for medical women.

The aims of the society were to improve the health of all people—but with a focus on women and children in Victoria—and to provide professional development opportunities, mentoring and support to other female medical students and doctors. The medical women discussed scientific approaches to social reform. Having already overcome their own challenges in order to be accepted into university and then gain medical employment, here they planted the seed for the creation of a hospital run by women, for

*Dr Sr Mary Glowrey JMJ caring for a young boy with leprosy, c. 1926, photograph, 15.0 × 18.0 cm, from the album 'Groetem uit Indie', c. 1920–30. The Glowrey Papers, Collection of the Catholic Women's League of Victoria and Wagga Wagga.*

women. In 1899, Queen Victoria Hospital was established, funded by the women of Victoria through the state-run 'shilling fund': all women were encouraged to donate a shilling towards the purchase of the building that was to house their hospital, in which female graduates were given the chance to work.

The Victorian Medical Women's Society established links with other state-run organisations, and the Australian Federation of Medical Women was formed in 1927. As early as 1919, the Medical Women's International Association came into being, founded at the first international congress of medical women, held in New York. Medical women from around the globe were thus linked through these sister organisations. The collective voice of medical women continues to advocate for women and to raise the benchmark for health around the world through the United Nations.

Dr Magdalena Simonis is president of the Victorian Medical Women's Society.

### **Mary Glowrey: Responding to the call**

**Sharon Wallace**

Born in 1887 to a devoutly Catholic family, Mary Glowrey's extraordinary intellect was apparent from an early age. After completing first-year arts at the University of Melbourne, she began studying medicine. She joined the St Vincent's Hospital Clinical School in her fourth year, graduating with an MBBS in 1910.

Glowrey's first appointment, at Christchurch Hospital, made her the first woman resident doctor in New Zealand. In 1912 she was appointed to the Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital and St Vincent's Hospital in Melbourne, and in 1916 she

became inaugural president of the Catholic Women's Social Guild. On reading a pamphlet on the work of Dr Agnes McLaren in India, Mary felt the call of a religious vocation and resolved to become a medical missionary. But first she undertook further study, graduating with an MD from the University of Melbourne in 1919.

Glowrey travelled to Guntur, southern India, in 1920, entering the Dutch convent of the Sisters of the Society of Jesus, Mary and Joseph (MJM). She received permission to undertake her novitiate and to practise medicine as a nun, learning Dutch and Telugu during her training.



Dr Margaret Henderson OBE at the ceremony in which the University of Melbourne awarded her the Doctor of Medical Science *honoris causa*, 11 September 2012. Photograph courtesy University of Melbourne Advancement Office.



Two years later, Sister Mary of the Sacred Heart began work as a sole practitioner. She was the first nun-doctor missionary.

St Joseph's Hospital in Guntur was opened within a few years and here Glowrey cared for both inpatients and outpatients. By 1929 the outpatients numbered in excess of 40,000 a year. Dr Sister Mary and the JMJ sisters began training local women, and Glowrey also taught science in the high school. Guntur's JMJ provincial superior said Mary 'treated everyone with same care ... Incurable patients found a special place in [her] heart ... She did all in her power to give them some relief'.

Glowrey also wrote papers against the rise of eugenics and euthanasia, and her vision extended to broader public health issues. In 1943 she founded the Catholic Health Association of India, to improve health education and to teach Catholic principles in medical and nursing practice.

Sadly, Dr Sister Mary Glowrey succumbed to cancer in May 1957. On 27 March 2013 she achieved the first of four official approvals on the path to sainthood.

Dr Sharon Wallace is pathologist in charge of anatomical pathology at St John of God Pathology Victoria, with clinical and administrative responsibilities.

### **Margaret Mary Henderson Christine Kilpatrick**

Living in post-war London, Dr Margaret Henderson (born 1915) applied in 1947 for the position of honorary physician to outpatients at the Royal Melbourne Hospital (RMH). She applied mainly 'to strike a blow for women in medicine', and then put the matter out of her mind, as 'there had never been a woman appointed to the Honorary staff'.<sup>1</sup>

Henderson had spent two years as resident medical officer at the RMH after graduating in 1938. As the tide of war swept across Australia, she gained an MD, undertook research at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute, worked with Euan Littlejohn in general practice and in medical outpatients at the RMH, and served with the Australian Military Forces.

As war ended, the Red Cross recruited Henderson for post-war civilian work as a senior medical officer in outlying Malay villages, dealing with nutritional and tropical diseases. She then developed her interest in respiratory and thoracic medicine in London and Switzerland, gaining membership and then fellowship of the Royal College of Physicians and the Royal Australasian College of Physicians.

One of the few women medical graduates at the time, Henderson was 'quite stunned' to receive a cable from Euan Littlejohn: she had been appointed to the honorary staff at RMH. This was one of many blows that Margaret Henderson struck for women in an era in which great tenacity and talent were required to achieve parity with men. She was acutely aware of how her actions influenced prospects for other women, and her strength of character and perceptive mind have made her highly regarded in medicine—held in great esteem and widely sought after as a teacher.

Besides her work at the RMH, Henderson was honorary physician to the Queen Victoria Hospital and medical officer to Janet Clarke Hall for many years. She also gave outstanding service to the management committee of the Royal District Nursing Service for 18 years. She was awarded an OBE for services to medicine in 1976, a rare distinction in that era. In 2012 the University of Melbourne awarded her a Doctor of Medical Science *honoris causa*, recognising her pioneering leadership in establishing the rightful place of women in medicine.

Dr Christine Kilpatrick is chief executive officer of the Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne.

## Shirley Godwin: Challenging stereotypes

### Mary Belfrage

Shirley Godwin is a Badimia Yamatji woman from the mid-west region of Western Australia. She has lived, studied and worked in Aboriginal communities across the country.

Godwin came to study medicine after a 20-year career in health research, both laboratory and community based. She was deeply motivated by the devastating and ongoing harmful effects of colonisation on Indigenous Australians and felt driven to improve their health status. This was a powerful calling that translated into an emotional and intellectual minefield. She successfully completed the rigours of undergraduate study. She also experienced the loneliness and complexity of inhabiting a world where she belonged to a minority group that has been excluded, both explicitly and in subtle ways, from full status and participation. She navigated the assault on her own identity, straddling different worlds, different values, different knowledge systems. She struggled with typically negative depictions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in case studies and clinical discussions. She witnessed a general lack of compassion and understanding

of the life circumstances, inter-generational burden of grief and trauma, and structural disadvantage faced by Indigenous people. Godwin also came to know that what felt like hostility or indifference from many of her peers was often a more benign ignorance, born of their own privilege.

With great resolve and courage, Godwin spoke up. She challenged stereotypes; she brought humanity and the lived experience to case discussions; she lobbied for greater inclusiveness; she challenged her teachers and fellow students to better understand that the burden of sickness, disadvantage and premature mortality experienced by many Indigenous people is a *result* of this country's history and not an expression of some intrinsic flaw.

Godwin's experience of studying medicine has led to her deep commitment to Indigenous medical education and support of fellow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors in training. Since graduation she has taught as a senior lecturer in Aboriginal health at Notre Dame University (Fremantle campus) and currently she is a general practitioner, medical educator and cultural mentor with WAGPET, the general practitioner training body in Western Australia.



Dr Shirley Godwin has a deep sense of gratitude for the support and companionship she experienced in finding her way.

Dr Mary Belfrage is the medical director of the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service in Fitzroy, Melbourne.

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1 Margaret Henderson, *Perspectives—cursory and clinical: Reflections and memories of a Melbourne physician*, Melbourne: self-published.