The Royal Women's Hospital, known affectionately to the community as The Women's, has been part of the social fabric of Melbourne and Victoria for more than 160 years. Its long history reflects profound changes in medical and nursing care, science and research, ethics and social mores, gender roles, religion, economics and politics over that time. Eminent medical historian Professor Janet McCalman tells us that:

The Royal Women's Hospital opened in August 1856 as the Melbourne Lying-In Hospital and Infirmary for the Diseases Peculiar to Women and Children, in a terrace house in Albert Street, East Melbourne.

The colony was in the midst of a gold rush that would bring half a million people in the decade. Women were abandoned—pregnant and destitute—while their husbands and erstwhile lovers tried their luck on the goldfields. The need for a charity lying-in hospital for women without homes was urgent.¹

Among the rich collections of the Medical History Museum at the University of Melbourne is the First annual report of the Melbourne Lying-In Hospital and Infirmary for Diseases of Women and Children, dated 13 December 1856. It states that one of the hospital's distinguishing characteristics would be ‘the admission […] of poor women during their confinements, with provision to insure proper medical attendance, with judicious and kind nursing during their stay’. The hospital would, the report predicts, ‘supply a want that has long been felt to exist, and which could not be satisfactorily met by any of the previously existing Charitable Institutions in Melbourne’. Thus began the history of the Royal Women's Hospital.

The hospital's History, Archives and Alumni Committee has collaborated with the university's Medical History Museum to produce The Women's: Carers, advocates and reformers, a major exhibition being staged at the Medical History Museum from 16 April to 2 November 2019, and accompanying book, tracing the history of women's health in Victoria generally, and the Royal Women's Hospital in particular, through our combined collections.

The Royal Women's Hospital Archive and Historical Collection is currently undergoing a transformation. The official records and some photographs have been transferred to Public Record Office Victoria, where they will be preserved, catalogued and made accessible to researchers and the wider community. The historical collection, artefacts, photographs and other material will come under the university's custodianship at the Medical History Museum. Established in 1967 through a grant from the Wellcome Trust, today our museum holds more than 8,000 items, covering the history of the Melbourne Medical School and the broader history of medicine in Australia and internationally. The recent major addition from the Women's greatly enriches the museum, and demonstrates the importance of the university's hospital partners in providing care, research and education.

From its beginnings in 1862, Melbourne Medical School has had strong connections with the Women's. The University of Melbourne's first lecturer in obstetric medicine and diseases of women and children, appointed in 1864, was one of the founders of the hospital, Dr Richard Tracy (1826–1874). The hospital and the university form partnerships and collaborations through teaching and research, with both institutions leading the field in women's health.

The Women's: Carers, advocates and reformers explores the achievements of important individuals, revolutions in clinical care, legal reform on abortion and assisted fertility, professional and public education, and advanced
research. Importantly, the rich history of Indigenous peoples’ knowledge and practices for pregnancy and childbirth is acknowledged through contributions by senior Victorian Indigenous women.

The few selected items from the exhibition that are illustrated in this article include instruments, a midwifery nurse’s case, and an ambulance for transporting premature babies. Experts were invited to write on various items, with three extracts from the catalogue reproduced below.

Dr Tracy’s ovariotomy instruments

Richard Walpole

Six years after the Lying-In Hospital was established, the Melbourne Medical School opened its doors, in 1862. Recruitment of staff began in earnest with the arrival in 1863 of the first professor of medicine, George Britton Halford. Richard Tracy, a graduate of Glasgow and Dublin, was appointed the following year as lecturer in obstetric medicine and diseases of women and children.

Tracy performed the first successful ovariotomy in Victoria, in 1864, and became renowned locally and internationally for a series of successful ovariotomies. Shown below are his ovariotomy instruments, which were selected and sent from England by his mentor, Sir Thomas Spencer Wells, surgeon to Queen Victoria and a leader in obstetrics, who pioneered this surgical procedure for relieving women suffering from ovarian tumours. Tracy corresponded with Wells from Melbourne and was instructed by him in the technique. Tracy’s success rate ultimately exceeded that of Wells, with only four deaths from 20 operations, performed in the Lying-In Hospital and in private homes—despite never having seen the operation performed.

A midwifery nurse’s case

Madonna Grehan

Florence Green (1876–1964) trained as a midwifery nurse at the Women’s Hospital in a two-year scheme designed for women without prior qualifications in nursing. (For
The Women’s: Carers, advocates and reformers is on display at the Medical History Museum, on the 2nd floor of the Brownless Biomedical Library, Parkville campus, from Tuesday 16 April to Saturday 2 November 2019. Opening hours are 10 am to 5 pm Monday to Friday, 1 pm to 5 pm Saturday.

**Left:** Women’s Hospital, Ambulance for transporting premature baby, 1949, wood, metal, rubber, acrylic; 85 × 115 × 70 cm. A1990_18_005, Royal Women’s Hospital Collection.

**Below:** Baby in transport incubator, c. 1960, photograph, 10.0 × 12.0 cm. PA Folder_43_21, Royal Women’s Hospital Collection.

general nurses, the course was one year.) Those enrolled in midwifery training at the Women’s were referred to as ‘midwifery pupil nurses’, yet their certificates bore the title ‘Obstetrical Nurse’. This term was adopted in 1898 after the pupils requested replacement of the longstanding title ‘Ladies Monthly Nurse’.

As was required at the time, Green’s case (pictured in part on page 63) is lined with a draw-sheet. Starched white aprons, collar, cuffs and studs, cloth belts with silver buckles, cap, silk stockings, and a silk handkerchief seem ready for the next wearing. A large enamel dish holds a nail brush, gallipots for solutions, and a kidney dish for injections. Other items include a glass urinary catheter and pipettes, enemata, a measuring glass for medications, syringes and needles, bottles, bandages, cotton swabs and gauzes. There are artery and other forceps, scissors, twine to tie the umbilical cord, safety pins, and a metal spoon for measuring baby formula.

**Transporting fragile babies**

**Neil Roy**

This incubator (illustrated above) was constructed in 1949 by Mr Jack Murphy, chief engineer of the Women’s Hospital, under the supervision of paediatrician Dr Kate Campbell and medical superintendent Dr William Refshauge. It was used for transporting newborn infants from delivery suites or operating theatres to the baby nurseries, replacing the open cots previously used. It was also used for transporting babies to the Children’s Hospital if they required surgery or specialist care.

The sides and base are constructed of wood, and the top has sliding acrylic panels for access and observation. The carry-cot is suspended by springs on each corner to improve the ride. Essential warmth is provided by five hot-water bottles hanging on hooks on the inside walls, with a thermometer showing the temperature inside the cot. Oxygen is provided from a cylinder placed externally in the recess at one end, with gauges showing the capacity of the cylinder and the flow rate. The oxygen is directed through a pipe that runs around the inside of the cot between the walls and the hot-water bottles, thus warming the gas before it is delivered to the baby via a rubber tube emerging from the end of the pipe.

Dr Jacqueline Healy is senior curator of the Medical History Museum and the Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum, in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences, University of Melbourne. Professor Janet McCalman AC is a Redmond Barry Distinguished Professor of the University of Melbourne, and a professor of history in the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health. Richard Walpole is a descendant of hospital founder Dr Richard Tracy. Dr Madonna Grehan is a historian, and president of the Australian and New Zealand Society of the History of Medicine. Dr Neil Roy AM was a consultant paediatrician at the Women’s from 1975 to 2007.

**The Women’s: Carers, advocates and reformers** is on display at the Medical History Museum, on the 2nd floor of the Brownless Biomedical Library, Parkville campus, from Tuesday 16 April to Saturday 2 November 2019. Opening hours are 10 am to 5 pm Monday to Friday, 1 pm to 5 pm Saturday.

https://medicalhistorymuseum.mdhs.unimelb.edu.au/