

A Hospital Close to Home

A selected history of local maternity and medical care in Perth's Western Suburbs

Cate Pattison

catepattisonresearch@gmail.com

December, 2018

Abstract

This research is based on oral history interviews exploring in-patient care within the suburbs of Cottesloe, Peppermint Grove and Mosman Park in the 20th century, with a focus on two local institutions: Devonleigh Hospital and Matron Brand's Maternity Hospital. Initially opened as a general hospital in 1928, Devonleigh was established by Matron Florence Grono to provide surgical, medical and maternity care. Then acquired by the State Government in 1949, it also served as a training hospital for nurses through until the late 1970s. Matron Brand opened her small 'lying in' maternity facility in her Mosman Park home in 1923, with many local babies born there until its closure in the 1940s. Stories from those that remember these two examples depict a once-dominant model of locally-based medical and maternity care which is now rarely found in the urban Australian environment. Some supporting historical research was undertaken at the State Records Office of Western Australia and elsewhere. The work was commissioned by the Grove Community History Library and conducted in 2018.



*Florence Grono, founder of Devonleigh Hospital,
date unknown.
Image courtesy Jim Paton.*

Introduction

This oral history-based research project explores in-patient care within the suburbs of Cottesloe, Peppermint Grove and Mosman Park in the 20th century, with a focus on two local institutions: Devonleigh Hospital and Matron Brand's Maternity Hospital. Stories from those that remember these two examples depict historic models of locally-based medical and maternity care now rarely operating in urban Australia. The research explores the history of these particular facilities, by gathering personal recollections from those who were patients within them or descendent of significant personnel. Their stories also portray an experience of maternity care in mid-century Australia quite different to that experienced today. Unless noted, much of the information provided here has been gleaned from the oral histories conducted¹ and from government files held with the State Records Office of Western Australia. Suggestions are made for further research opportunities relevant to this work.

Background

'Lying-in' homes providing services for maternity confinement and childbirth were first recorded in Western Australia in 1856 and operated through until the 1960s, many run privately by community-based midwives, in their own homes.² Other facilities were established to cater for the poor and disadvantaged by benevolent groups such as the House of Mercy, Salvation Army and Sisters of the People. However from 1915 onwards the number of lying-in homes in Perth began to decline, as tighter regulations were introduced and the sector began to consolidate. Although King Edward Memorial Hospital (KEMH) had been commissioned in 1916, a number of small private hospitals that opened their doors in Perth between the Wars such as Devonleigh could also offer obstetric care and began to absorb demand for this service within their communities.

Devonleigh Hospital

Founded in Anstey Street Cottesloe in 1928, Devonleigh Hospital was opened by Matron Florence Grono to provide medical and maternity care for local private patients. Florence Grono had moved to Perth with her family from Mittagong NSW in 1904 and completed her nursing training at Fremantle Hospital by 1910. Her father Arthur Grono was a successful local builder, living first in Swan Street in Mosman Park then Marmion Street in Cottesloe. Florence would have spent the years after WW1 caring for returned servicemen, with many thousands requiring medical attention on their arrival back in Perth.³ The impact of the War would have put enormous pressure on hospitals in Perth in the early 1920s, with local doctors and patients frustrated by the lack of facilities then available for domestic demand. During the years of War and Depression doctors would have welcomed a convenient facility where they could treat local private patients.

In 1925 Florence's mother Mary-Anne paid £1,250 to acquire a large home over three lots at 9 Anstey Street in Cottesloe opposite Loreto Convent (known then as 'Casey's Acre'⁴), in order for Florence to open a private hospital at the encouragement of local doctors, in particular initially Drs Blackall and Tregonning, and later well supported by Drs Stubbe, Radcliffe-Taylor, Cox and Rockett.⁵ Dr Tregonning had been born and educated in Melbourne

and had travelled to Edinburgh in 1928 to receive a surgical qualification with a specialism in gynaecology.⁶ Dr Blackall who was closely involved had come to Perth from the UK to work in psychiatry, however ended up in general practice delivering many babies and becoming a local household name.

Devonleigh Hospital soon became a popular choice for people requiring minor surgery and medical attention. Single-bed rooms opened on to a veranda; and an 8-bed ward, operating theatre and nursery were also created, supported by ancillary buildings. A new nurses' home on lot 62 Airlie Street was built by Arthur Grono and connected through to the hospital buildings, the eventual entire site totalling over one and half acres of land. At the time of inception most women would have given birth in small local 'lying in' homes run by midwives, of which there were numerous local options, such as those in Marmion, Mann and Perth Streets in Cottesloe. Devonleigh offered a more 'medical' experience where a GP or even specialist would routinely attend the birth.

Matron Grono worked closely with Dr Blackall in particular, who delivered many local babies whilst concurrently developing his interest in local botany which involved numerous extended fieldtrips with government botanist C.A. Gardener⁷ to remote Western Australia. He was reportedly accompanied by Florence on at least one expedition in 1940, before his death from bowel cancer in 1941. Posthumously William Blackall became a name synonymous with early botanical research and development of wildflower reference keys.⁸ Another contributor recalled Dr Blackall being his mother's family doctor in the 1920s and 30s; if an unusual wildflower was found, Mother would tell him to 'take it down to Dr Blackall'.

Devonleigh became regarded as a well-run and popular local private hospital, providing maternity, surgical, medical and some emergency services for twenty years, through the Depression and WW2. In 1946 the Commonwealth had introduced measures under the Labor Chifley Government to ensure that all people had access to public hospitals regardless of their financial means, which would have impacted on the volume of people seeking public hospital services.⁹ Followed up by the *National Health Service Act* passed in 1948, the opportunity to sell to a government trying to build an adequate health infrastructure was considered one to be seized, and in 1949 Florence sold the hospital building and contents to the WA Health Department upon the advice of her brother-in-law accountant (and a foundation president of the WA Liberal Party), Jim Lampard Paton. Nearby Lucknow Hospital in Claremont with and the Swan Hospital in Leederville were also purchased by the government that same year.

Records show that at the time of the sale Florence had wanted to retain a portion of the land but she was eventually persuaded to sell the entire site, the buildings noted as being in 'poor repair' at the time. Her venture had undoubtedly been profitable, as she had already purchased over 500 acres of productive land in semi-rural Bedfordale ten years prior in order to produce fresh food during the war for the hospital and to house her extended family. She retired to Bedfordale upon the sale of her Cottesloe hospital and stayed there until her death in 1978 aged 90.

Once acquired by the WA Health Department in 1949, Devonleigh continued to offer 40 beds for maternity and gynaecology patients,¹⁰ as well as general and maternity nursing training. Although now a government-owned asset, it was still able to offer single rooms for private obstetric patients. A well-equipped workshop on the grounds also serviced Woodside Maternity Hospital in East Fremantle. Records show that in 1962 there were approximately 50 babies born a month at Devonleigh, with an average of 16 patients admitted at any time, who were stayed for approximately 10 days, and had cots in their own rooms. At this time there were only a few theatre bookings per week, but by the late 1970s, only about 150 babies a year were born at the hospital annually, and surgical, particularly gynaecological operations (anecdotally, many discreet 'D&Cs') were making up most of the other 2000 admissions. In 1979 the decision was made by the Health Department to close the facility as occupancy had fallen to 55%, directing people to Woodside Hospital in East Fremantle as an alternative. At this time funding for metropolitan hospital beds was being phased out, and an expansion at KEMH nearing completion. The 46 staff employed at the time were offered jobs at KEMH, after the Minister for Health of the day Ray Young was forced to express his embarrassment when radio station 6IX broke the news before official notice had been given to staff or their union.¹¹

Upon closure as a local hospital, Devonleigh was then taken over by the Department of Mental Health Services in 1979 and converted at a cost of \$90,000 to provide accommodation for '32 moderately handicapped children', as well as offering independence training and day care for intellectually disabled adults. The Loretto/St Louis/John XXIII College board had expressed an interest in buying the site in 1979 adjacent to Loretto, however their offer was not successful and the school was to eventually sell their own premises in 1986 and move to a site in Mount Claremont, the heritage art-deco buildings later fully demolished in 1990. It was then decided that Devonleigh was not a suitable location for mental health services, anecdotally due to community objections, and the premises were then put up for private sale in the late 1980s, whereupon all buildings were demolished and site subdivided into separate housing-unit developments.

A regrettable viewpoint on the site's history was to emerge in 2012 when a Senate Enquiry into forced adoptions revealed a submission by a woman who experienced sedation, coercion and cruelty at the time of giving birth as an unmarried mother at Devonleigh in 1968; a time when the practice of maternity hospitals operating as adoption agents was now known to be widespread, yet kept quiet under a 'veil of secrecy'. The woman reported being made to shower at night, hide from other patients, being belittled by staff, experiencing profound shock and life-long impact from her experiences.¹² For many years (1922-1974) nearby Hillcrest Maternity Home operated by the Salvation Army in North Fremantle had welcomed unmarried women and many babies born there were put up for adoption, therefore it's likely that a quiet admittance to somewhere like Devonleigh would have offered families a higher degree of privacy regarding their predicament.

Matron Brand's Maternity Hospital

Matron Jean Hamilton Kier Brand opened her small 'lying in' maternity facility in her Mosman Park home at 1 Victoria Street, near Stirling Highway, in 1923. Matron Brand came to Fremantle from Glasgow with her husband Tom in the 1920s and after a period working as a nurse on the group settlements in Denmark, moved to Perth after completing her

maternity training at Hillcrest Hospital mentioned above. Jean operated her small maternity 'hospital' through until the 1940s, although for a time handing over to two other nurses while she left the area for health reasons (the sea air was deemed the source of her asthma). Her husband Tom worked at the Colonial Sugar Refinery in Mosman Park.

Along with the fate of other small lying in homes in the area such as those that had been operated by Nurses Loveland, Jones, Doyle, Beale and Piper in Cottesloe; Matron Brand closed her home to expectant mothers in the 1940s, when alternatives such as Devonleigh Hospital became the preferred option for private patients locally.

Method

Using 'themed project' model used in previous research conducted for the Grove Library, this research captured recollections of those with experience or association with these particular facilities. A newspaper article in the local newspaper invited people to come forth to participate in interviews held at the Grove Library and other participants were attracted by word of mouth. It was hoped that contributors would be able to provide stories about a much broader range of sites in the area, however the selection that came forth were mainly limited to the two focussed upon in this summary. Interviews were recorded on a Zoom2 recording device and a one-hour compilation of highlights produced and edited using WavePad Software. Copyright clearance forms were signed and transcription notes from each interview prepared. Some background research into lying-in homes and medical care in the area was also conducted, as well as the access of some government files relating to Devonleigh held at the State Records Office in Perth.

Discussion

Participants in the project are grouped into two categories: those related to the founders of the two institutions, and those who were patients in attendance.

Bruce Blackall is the grandson of Dr William Blackall who was a household name in Cottesloe and Peppermint Grove from 1910 to 1940 and integral in the establishment of Devonleigh. Bruce has been working with other researchers who have been investigating Blackall's significant contributions to botanical history in Western Australia, however he was well aware of the little detail known about his grandfather's medical career, apart from him being a household name in the area for many decades. Also interviewed were two of Florence Grono's surviving nephews, Bill Grono and Jim Paton. Bill and Jim both had strong memories of Florence and her influence on their lives and those in their community that benefitted from her hospital and its excellent reputation. They both spoke of the close relationship she had with Dr Blackall (although how close is open to speculation) and the professional relationships that allowed for the private hospital to flourish. Florence's purchase of the land in Bedforddale was visionary in that it created long term security for the wider family, many of whom Matron, businesswoman and spinster Florence supported in various ways.

There were no interviewees who had memories of being a patient of Florence Grono's however a number had babies at Devonleigh in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, during which time maternity care was evolving. By the mid-1960s mothers were permitted to keep their babies with them in the hospital, after many years when they were closely guarded in a nursery and only handed over at feeding time. The 'Matron' always reigned supreme, and set strict rules for patient care and behaviour; Matron Erskine and Sister Reynolds mentioned as being particularly unyielding and sometimes lacking in empathy. Patients were instructed to include in their birth announcements: 'no visitors for five days'. Interestingly less controlled was the sharing of breast milk, where a woman's excess milk would routinely be used for other babies, well through the 1960s.¹³

Matron Jean Brand's grandson Matthew Slattery has strong memories of Scottish Presbyterian Jean, who would give him a scripture for his birthday and expect it memorised on their next meeting. Matthew's mother described how difficult it was for Jean and her husband Tom to keep the hospital profitable, often struggling to cover costs particularly during the depression when despite a government 'baby bonus' available, many patients were unwilling to apply for it due to the stigma of welfare and were thus unable to pay their bill, donating goods or services in kind as payment.

Conclusion

Demolished in the 1980s, not only are there no remains of Devonleigh, there are also no photographs on record of this community institution which was the birthplace of thousands of babies in the area over a fifty year period. The site of Nurse Brand's Hospital in Victoria Street was also redeveloped in recent decades. This model of surgical and maternity services close to home is one remembered by fewer people in the area with each passing year, these services provided by a smaller number of large hospitals that service the entire city and state. At time when local GPs would not only deliver the babies of the families they cared for; before the 1950s there were very few medical specialists in Perth, and routine surgical procedures were conducted by local doctors.¹⁴ Many interviewed commented on how much they appreciated the long-term relationships between their families and local doctors, some bringing two generations of babies into the world.

This oral history work has contributed to some outline research of Devonleigh Hospital and the practices relating to lying-in hospitals in the area, however further reading of files held by the SRO and deeper research into the contextual healthcare environment of WA at the time would be of great benefit to understanding the history of in-patient care in the Western Suburbs of Perth in the 20th century. The use as a training facility for nurses during the 1950s and 60s would also be worthwhile exploring. Finally, the findings of the 2012 Commonwealth Senate enquiry into force adoptions would suggest that there were possibly many instances of this practice that took place at Devonleigh and other such local maternity facilities in the western suburbs of Perth, however although probed, no participants had any memories of this practice, confirming it was indeed taboo and covert, which certainly makes it interesting for further research.

This research was commissioned by the Grove Community History Library in 2018



Matron Brand in her garden at 1 Victoria Street, Mosman Park, 1930s.

Image courtesy Matthew Slattery

Endnotes

- 1 Contributing participants included: James Paton, Bill Grono, Bruce Blackall, Brian Heller, Ivy Cray, Wendy Hillier, Betty Matthews, Jenny Twine, Jenny and Colin Ross, Matthew Slattery, Betty Matthews, Val McKirdy.
- 2 See May Flanagan, "Lying-in (or Maternity) Homes in Western Australia from about 1860 to 1960", *Early Days*, Vol.11, Part 3, 1997, p.340; and, McKenzie, Briony. *Place and power: A history of maternity service provision in Western Australia, 1829-1950*. Diss. Murdoch University, 2015. These references present two different perspectives on the move from the domestic to medical environment for childbirth, the first assuming this to be positive, the second questioning such and noting that by the 1970s a desire from women to be able to give birth outside hospital was again gaining popularity.
- 3 Participant Jim Paton estimated that there may have been up to 25,000 returned servicemen requiring hospital care at this time.
- 4 The land comprised Lots 55, 58 and 59 Anstey Street and was purchased from the Casey family who owned Casey's Woodyard and Casey's Shop situated opposite the nearby Star of the Sea Church on Stirling Highway.
- 5 Pascoe, Rob, and Neil Cumpston. *Peppermint Grove, Western Australia's Capital Suburb*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- 6 Tunbridge, Peter., and Kamien, Max. *The medical practice at 328 Stirling Highway, Clareont from 1896-2011* 2nd ed. City Beach, W.A.: Max Kamien, 2011.
- 7 B J. Grieve, 'Blackall, William Edward (187601941), Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, Volume 7, 1979.
- 8 William E. Blackall came from Kent in 1908 with wife Ethel and worked in general practice taking over from Douglas Darbyshire, as well as mental health as the G.M.O at Claremont Hospital. He was injured in France during service in WW1. Dr Blackall was also an active botanist, and published: Blackall, W., & Grieve, B. (1954). *How to know Western Australian wildflowers*. Perth, W.A: University of Western Australia Press. The work was published in three parts, has had two editions and numerous reprints. He reportedly travelled often to the Murchison on field trips, where Florence accompanied him.
- 9 McCavanagh Dianne, Smith Geoff, Williams Theresa, Brooks Sioux. *Health 2020: A Discussion Paper*. Health Department of Western Australia, 1998. Accessed online December 2018, https://www.health.wa.gov.au/publications/documents/health2020_discussion_paper.pdf
- 10 The Hospital Benefit Fund of Western Australia had been launched in 1941 as a precursor to Medicare. Most interviewed for this research attended Devonleigh as private (subsidised) patients mentioned HBF and paying an additional fee, further research required.
- 11 File information from WA Health Department, WA State Records Office, accessed September 2018
- 12 Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee, *Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2012. Submission 129.
- 13 Although still not once more a normal practice between new mothers, a 'PREM milkbank' for breast milk donors and recipients does operate at KEMH.
- 14 Medicine was not taught in Western Australia until the opening of the University of Western Australia's Medical School in 1957. Until this time medical students often travelled to Adelaide to train.