

Sex and Suffering: Women's Health in a Women's Hospital - the Royal Women's Hospital, Melbourne, 1856-1996 by **Janet McCalman**. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998. Pp. xii + 420; \$39.95 (cloth).

Who else but Janet McCalman could turn a long, detailed history of a hospital into an absorbing read? Her ambition was to write a social history of women's health as well as a history of a hospital and, with the help of an ARC Fellowship, this is what she has achieved. The illustrations alone provide a rich commentary on women's health and the work of the Royal Women's Hospital, Melbourne. Photographs of staff, mothers and babies all show their individuality despite hospital imposed regimes of uniformity. Spread throughout the book are marvellous illustrations of McCalman's themes: formal group

photographs, informal "snaps," streetscapes, graphs, medical illustrations, and extracts from the records used to write the history. McCalman's publisher has also cleverly got around the problem of medical terms used throughout by placing the definitions in small print in the margins.

McCalman has the art of encapsulating her huge themes into down to earth fundamentals, as in her Foreword when she neatly summarises the mismatch between sexuality and fertility. From the beginning there is a determination not to lose sight of the individual whilst telling the institutional story. So the book begins with twenty-two year old Miss Bridget Kelly who walked four miles to the Hospital in the early hours of the morning of 22 January 1866. She carried her new born baby all that way, with the umbilical cord and placenta still attached. McCalman was able to do justice to the patients as, uniquely for an Australian hospital historian, she was allowed access to the patient records. Other individual stories emerge throughout the book. There are less than flattering glimpses of Board president, Janet Lady Clarke, and an idea is given of the misery the Hospital Board inflicted on Dr Lilian Alexander for being a woman. Who can forget the story of the midwife who still remembers her shift in the 1940s when all five babies she delivered died by the morning: she could only hide and weep (227). Above all, there are the stories of the individual patients. McCalman's use of oral history provides particularly rich material when detailing the plight of the migrant women of the post World War II period facing the bewildering hospital regime with its unpalatable food and its cold, unfamiliar practices.

The first of the seven parts of this book is a deft sketch of the evangelical, philanthropic and medical impulses that led to the founding of the Hospital in 1856. These religious and medical impulses sometimes combined to benefit the Hospital. At other times, they led to conflict. Such conflict ranged from the debate over whether to admit pregnant single women in the 1860s, the shock of inadvertently appointing a Catholic to the medical staff in 1951, and the acrimonious debate over the provision of abortion for public patients which dominated the 1970s. The mutual dependencies and linking ideologies of the hospital system are outlined. For most of its history, the Hospital was dominated by the fear of disorder that could lead to infection, deaths and medical failure. The latter in a public hospital could spread odium on the doctor's private practice: success within the Hospital enhanced the doctor's reputation and practice outside the Hospital. The fear of disorder, linked to a genuine concern for the patients' welfare, led to the rigid imposition of discipline on both staff and patients.

The narrative of the Hospital sheds light on the great social events of the period. The depressions of the 1890s and 1930s had an obvious but no less heart-rending impact on women's health. Other cataclysmic events had a less well-known impact. The Irish famine, for example, left malnourished Irish girls with contracted or deformed pelvis probably due to rickets. At its worst, in 1860, one in every fifteen Irish born patients suffered from this problem. Gross pelvic deformity, as McCalman points out, doomed every pregnancy to end in tragedy. Even in times of prosperity, then and now, birth could result in lifelong pain and disability such as when the perineum tore through to the anus. The medical history is particularly enhanced by the use of the doctors' case books and

also of the medical students' case books of their community visits to impoverished patients. Each decade seems to have presented its own crises. In the depression decade of the 1890s, for example, the prevalence of post-abortion sepsis led to an association in the public mind with the Hospital and illegal abortions. A sordid stigma of criminality attached itself to the Hospital and its staff. Against this background of suffering, McCalman provides the pragmatic reminder that 80 percent of deliveries resulted in the normal assurance that "mother and child are doing well."

Another aspect of the Hospital is as a teaching institution. The co-founder, Dr Tracey, is presented as an extraordinary man with a belief in what we now call life-long education. He was so untouched by medical arrogance, despite his eminence as a surgical pioneer, that he co-authored a medical research paper with a patient, and a female one at that. His medical predecessors were mostly of a different mould. Some doctors were early champions of Lister's theories, others were long-term opponents. The darkest hours appear to be in the 1880s with deadly outbreaks of puerperal fever that periodically closed the Hospital after killing many of its patients. The solution was a strict regime of medical and nursing antiseptic midwifery that lasted until recent decades. The ideal was for the staff, especially the nurse-midwives, to be "servants in the temple of purity." Antisepsis, McCalman argues, "both saved lives and imposed discipline, and that discipline easily degenerated into petty tyranny... The culture of antisepsis, at its worst and under duress, licensed cruelty" (85).

In modern times the material is overwhelming. Social, legal and technological changes and medical discoveries, including the impact of eugenics and the "magic bullet" of particular drugs, transformed hospital practice and women's health. Finally, there was the oral contraceptive which, along with other medical improvements, "changed everything for women" (223). As Patrick Cook once noted in a cartoon, there is too much history going on out there. This over-abundance of material results in some curious choices such as the skating over of one of the most significant events in Australian nursing history - when nurses and midwives were driven to do the unbelievable and went on strike for fifty days. It is also curious that she claims as a "fact" that nurses resent doctors and adopted the ideal of vocational celibacy in a climate that made it easy to hate men in general yet makes no mention of lesbian nurses (150-1). Heterosexuality or celibacy is not the only choice for all women and it is time historians allowed some of their subjects to come out of the closet.

If you start to read this book you will want to continue and at the end you will have a new, valuable perspective on social history. And while you are reading, it is certain that you will drive friends and colleagues mad by recounting some of the fascinating vignettes which illustrate the theme of 140 years of sex and suffering.

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