



Defying gender divides: trailblazers of the Women's and Children's Hospital

An exhibition curated by **Tori Delany**
(Volunteer, WCHN History & Heritage Collection)
as part of the 2019 South Australia's History Festival

Within certain key disciplines of healthcare, gender stereotyping has historically been well entrenched. Medicine was seen as a role for men, and nursing as a role for women. In the history of the Women's and Children's Health Network, a number of individuals have defied these socially constructed gender roles to chase their dream careers at one of the Network's major hospitals. The exhibition *Defying gender divides* celebrates some of these men and women, and explores their complex and different experiences in the fields of medicine, child nursing and midwifery.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women in Australia were dissuaded from seeking work outside of the home, and often denied opportunities to participate in tertiary education. Women who desired to pursue careers in medicine faced a significant barrier in the form of deeply conservative views about the capabilities of women, and a belief that they were inherently unsuited to the role of physician. The Adelaide Children's Hospital (ACH) benefited from the contributions of some trailblazing women in South Australia who defiantly challenged these views.

Laura Fowler was the first woman to graduate in medicine from the University of Adelaide, and the first female doctor to be appointed to the ACH in 1892. Doctor Helen Mayo was highly influential. Among her many achievements, in 1909 she developed the Mothers' and Babies' Health Association, the forerunner to Child and Family Health Services. Doctor Mary Burnell was the only anaesthetist employed at the Children's Hospital during World War Two, and was on call 24 hours a day while caring for her own children. These individuals successfully entered a field that was not necessarily welcoming towards women, and made significant contributions to medicine and this Hospital in its earlier years.

While women increasingly entered the field of medicine throughout the 20th century, and this was reflected in the staff body of the ACH, it was not until the 1960s that male nurses debuted at the Hospital. One of the first male nurses to complete a full course of general nursing training here was Kevin Donahue, who graduated in 1969. From this point on, men gradually infiltrated areas of nursing at the Children's Hospital. Several of these are captured



Image: Doctor Helen Mayo



Image: Portrait of former ACH nurse trainee John Ttikirou, painted by Tori Delany, 2019

in photographs showcased in the exhibition; each distinctly standing out as a single man in a sea of female peers. The exhibition also introduces a few men employed in more senior nursing positions during the 1970s, including educator and charge nurse roles.

Heading into the late 1970s and 1980s, men maintained a fairly steady presence in our trainee nursing groups. However, they rarely exceeded more than two in number per cohort of women students, and some training groups had no male participants at all. Where visual evidence could be found for these men in the History and Heritage Collection of the Women's and Children's Hospital, many have been recognised in this exhibition. *Defying gender divides* acknowledges their bravery in going against the status quo and social expectations in seeking to begin their nursing careers at the ACH during a period when training was still conducted in-house.

Historically, midwifery has been considered a women's role. The *Nurses' Registration Act* in Tasmania (1952) and Victoria (1958) specifically barred men from registering as midwives. This act was not amended until two men challenged the law in order to train as midwives in the 1970s. Although there was no specific mention that midwives had to be female in the South Australian *Nurses Registration Act*, few men entered the profession in this state during the 1970s and 1980s, and they remain a distinct minority in the midwifery field even to this day. This exhibition features profiles of select men who trained and worked at the Queen Victoria Hospital. Exploring their experiences in practising midwifery, it focuses on the ways in which their gender did or did not colour their careers.

While women now constitute a significant part of the medical profession in Australia, midwifery and nursing – especially that involving the care of children – remain feminine domains. Men continue to be very much outnumbered by women. Therefore, those men who do enter these healthcare disciplines are still blazing trails, and challenging the notion of gendered roles, just as their predecessors did four decades ago. Stay tuned: history is being rewritten with each new generation of healthcare professionals.

Tori Delany



Image: Queen Victoria Hospital midwife Nigel Saunders with female staff, 1980



Image: WCH midwife Peter Lee with Penny Evans, 2011

This exhibition was planned and exhibited on the lands of the Kurna People. We pay our respects to the Kurna Elders past and present and to the Elders of the lands this brochure reaches.

The Curator wishes to thank: Jill Newman and Lauren Simeoni (WCH Foundation); Museum Consultant/Curator Emily Collins, Marg Lea, Natalie Dempster (WCHN History and Heritage Group); History Trust of SA; Tim Boord (WCHN Corporate Communications); Christopher Sprod (WCHN Clinical Photography); Deniece Press (WCHN Women's Outpatients); WCH Foundation Gallery Management Committee members: Alison Russell, Lis Brittan, Jackie Barreau. A special thank you to the exhibition informants: Mat Carter, John Ttikirou, Trevor Cresp, Jon Johanson, Rob Hull, David Roberts, Brad Allen and Peter Lee.

History and Heritage Collection

The Women's and Children's Health Network has a collection of historical artefacts which is managed by the WCHN History and Heritage Group. This was originally formed as the ICONS Group in 1995 by retired Adelaide Children's Hospital Staff. The WCHN History and Heritage Group aims to preserve, collect, collate, catalogue, store, display and interpret items of historical significance to the Women's and Children's Hospital and its predecessors the Adelaide Children's Hospital, the Queen Victoria Hospital and associated institutions.

Women's & Children's Hospital Foundation Arts in Health program

The WCH Foundation Arts in Health program coordinates five galleries in the Hospital, providing a space away from the stresses of treatment to distract, entertain and inspire, improving the visual environment. The Arts in Health programs integrate art into the life of the Hospital to improve people's health and wellbeing. We try to make the environment more 'child-friendly', making it look better and helping to make the time spent in hospital 'feel better'. The Yellow Heart Gallery provides a platform to share the WCHN History and Heritage Collection with the Hospital community and explore the significant people and events that shaped the Hospital today.

Defying gender divides: trailblazers of the Women's and Children's Hospital is on display in the Yellow Heart Gallery (Level 1, Zone F) at the Women's and Children's Hospital from May until the end of September 2019.

Cover image: Adelaide Children's Hospital trainee nurses, group 851 (graduated 1988)



Women's &
Children's Hospital
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