

Supporting Lives: Behind the Scenes at Women's and Children's Hospital

Hidden under the Women's and Children's Hospital is an archive of artefacts and images curated by the History and Heritage Collection Curator, Emily Collins.

Artists in Residence Amelia Walker (poet) and James Parker (visual artist) experience this archive by stepping into the silenced lives of porters (orderlies), cooks, cleaners, linen and logistics staff at the Women's and Children's Hospital in the early to mid-twentieth century. Often overlooked in comparison to nurses and doctors, these staff play crucial roles in patient hygiene, nutrition, comfort and more. Amelia and James, have transformed these tales from the hospital archives into a mixed-mode online and physical exhibition.

Dr Amelia Walker is a nurse-turned-poet who lectures in creative writing at the University of South Australia. James Parker is a visual artist who works mostly in the primary school system and in his own practise as an exhibiting printmaker and bookmaker.

These long-term collaborators have included dry-point prints, poetry, and digital storytelling in celebration of these hidden heroes and their unsung contributions.

Supporting Lives: Behind the Scenes at the Women's and Children's Hospital is centred around the trolleys used by these subtle and silent workers and their journeys throughout the hospital and the integral role they play.

Five Poems by Amelia Walker

'Porters: Norman and Kay'

'Corridor Choreography'

'Soul Food'

'Threads'

'With / out any trace'



Porters: Norman and Kay

Norman “Percy” Hindle was a first-rate packer of eggs
– or so the store-room attendants claimed,
grateful for an extra hand in their morning juggle
supplying demands.

Packing eggs was not part of Percy’s job
– not on paper –
but then neither was propping nervous patients
with cushions, chatting to calm them
as he lined up and captured phosphorescent snapshots:
secrets only radium’s glowing eye can coax
from under skin like a buried treasure
that seems sometimes cursed.

Still, Percy did that, too,
whenever Mr. Compton – lone radiologist
of the 1930s hospital – took vacation.
How did Percy feel, those days?

In the UK he’d qualified and worked as a nurse,
a Registered Nurse.
But 1930s Adelaide kept compassion bound
in knots with chromosomes:
men were deemed unfit for nursing.
So Percy became a porter, lending smiles
and a hand to store-room staffers when he could.
After hours, if something broke, he’d come in
and fix it, his young son in tow.

In 1972 the hospital employed Bernard Mead,
a UK-trained male nurse,
and in 1987, its first female porter
– Kay Hopkins, a former farmhand
and football fanatic,
who grinned, lopsided, maybe with amusement
or maybe hiding frustration,
the many times each day she found herself
mistaken for a nurse.



Note on 'Porters: Norman and Kay'

This poem reflects changing attitudes to gender and the gendering of professions in hospitals – in particular, the historic assumption that Porters (Orderlies) were male and Nurses female. The stories of Norman “Percy” Hindle in the 1930s and Kay Hopkins in the 1980s bring this out through ironic juxtaposition. Percy was a UK-qualified nurse who worked as a Porter because his gender ruled him out of nursing. Kay was a female Orderly who was repeatedly mistaken for a nurse. The line about Percy being a ‘first rate packer of eggs’ is from ‘A Day in the A.C.H. Store’, an article published in the staff bulletin (circa 1930s, author unknown). Other details about Percy are from information his son provided for the archives in an email dated 3 June 2006. Kay’s story is based on an article from staff magazine ‘The Needle’ vol. 1, no. 2: ‘PROFILE – What? A female orderly?’

Corridor Choreography

Maps are practical things
for laying out spaces
and finding ways through.
Yet they are more than this.
They are stories – histories
and archaeologies, made
to fold, unfold and become
ever re-made. Maps
are drafted, marked upon,
written and rewritten,
the same space portrayable
in so many ways, layered one
upon another upon another
over time as walls crumble
and lines blur
tracing subtle dance steps
of stones and mortar
with ink on paper.

Hospital maps are reminders
of these facts, ever shifting
– and more, they remind
how a hospital both contains
and cannot contain
bodies
of patients, staff, visitors



flooding in
and out, in
and out like breath
through lungs, like blood.
For a hospital is itself a body
made of, reliant on all the bodies
that shape and sustain it
as it shapes and sustains
countless lives bustling through
and beyond its halls
– so long, so loud,
yet speechless.

A hospital has many hearts
all beating their own counts
in rhythm with one
and another
each system depending
on all the others:

Without pipes, no water
could flow, nor mops
be pushed
down corridors scoured
to prevent infection.
Rippling through walls
like veins and arteries,
these water pipes weave
deftly round whistling linen
chutes that thread
and stitch their own system
of necessities:
without sterile gowns,
scrubs and sheets,
no surgery is done,
just as no wound heals
without nourishment
clattering in on tea trollies
from kitchen to ward
to ward
to ward
and back again,
messy plates set for washing
while switchboard wires
and signals whiz



and whirl to carry, to connect
voices of friends, families
and lovers, close by
and far.

Each of these is yet one more
though by no means the last
endlessly necessary form
of life support
for those on the edge
and fighting.

In hospital soaps and sitcoms,
the stars are almost always doctors
or nurses – stories worth telling, yes.
But what of the cleaners,
cooks and orderlies?
What of plumbers,
electricians and volunteers?
Switchboard operators?
Translators?
Builders?
Painters?
The entertainers
who bring laughs?
The counsellors
who allay fears?

A hospital is a body
made of many bodies,
countless hearts
beating hidden,
and it needs
every
single
one
to keep beating.



Note on 'Corridor Choreography':

'Corridor Choreography' responds in a broad-scale way to all the archival materials James and I explored while researching stories of workers whose roles and contributions we think deserve greater recognition and respect than they usually receive. It was the first poem I wrote for this project and contains initial hints at themes other poems later explored in more detail. For example, the lines 'without sterile gowns / scrubs and sheets / no surgery is done' anticipate points 'Threads' and 'With / out any Trace' make about the importance of clean linen and hygiene generally, while 'no wound heals / without nourishment / clattering in on tea trollies' signal the importance of nutrition, which in 'Soul Food' is the central focus. 'Corridor Choreography' additionally recognises switchboard operators, translators, plumbers, electricians, counsellors, volunteers, and entertainers (all of whom deserve poems and art in their own rights, too, but for this project we chose cleaners, porters, linen staff and kitchen staff because the archival materials about these four professions offered greatest scope for creative response). Metaphors of dancing evoke the fine processes via which all members of the hospital team work together, supporting one another in serving patients and the community. Images of maps similarly emphasise interconnections between parts operating as a whole, while emphasis on the hospital as a 'body' with 'many hearts' emphasises the living, human nature of this sophisticated system overall.



Soul Food

The military histories of hospitals still march
so pervasive even the food can't forget:
like everything, it falls into order, knows its place,
arriving neatly lined up – regimented trays
on squeaky trolleys, standing straight, to attention,
each tray itself strictly ordered
in standard formations of main course
and side dishes: lukewarm soups
beside crisp corner sandwiches,
each with its moulded plastic hat, even the jelly
somehow wobbling within rigid parameters:
forest-green, right-angled and square.

Hospital food is not known for its flavour
or texture
or smell
or anything else
to do with taste.

Yet with wards and wards of mouths to feed,
how else to do it?

In 1968, six newborns' later lives were changed
by a then-new scheme that recognised
and catered for dietary intolerances
that if ignored would have left them
requiring permanent care.

They'd be in their fifties now, those six,
What do they do? Who and how do they love?
And what do they think
when they look back – do they know
how different their lives could have been?
Their lives, and those of countless others
carefully nurtured across decades since?

No doubt those decades saw staff forced to wipe
plenty of tears, to endure many moans
over mashed peas, bland potatoes, lumpy custards.
But with bodies healed and systems strong,
what's that to remember?
Equally, how and why do people forget



all that becomes forgotten
or never even realised from the start?

Doctors and nurses often receive cards from patients
grateful for warm smiles and attentive care.

Who, if anyone, has ever sent a card
to the staff of the kitchen
who get the right meals
onto the right trays
often serving up the difference
between health or sickness,
death or life,
stacked on steaming trolley after trolley,
standing proud, to attention,
each dish beneath its moulded plastic hat.

Note on 'Soul Food'

This poem draws on multiple articles about the hospital's Diet Kitchen, which opened in 1959 to serve the nutritional needs of all hospital patients. It was at its time considered state-of-the art in terms of its capacities to cater for special dietary requirements. The specific story this poem considers is based on an article by Helen Caterer, which initially appeared in the Sunday Mail and was republished in Forceps no. 41 (1968). The article told the story of how six child outpatients with a blood disorder called phenylketonuria (PKU), which involves lack of an enzyme required to break down certain proteins in foods, were nourished with special diets and thereby evaded the brain damage they would have suffered if these nutritional needs had not been recognised and catered for. The poem uses this story to bring out how important the work of hospital kitchen and dietary staff is at every level. Even the simple acts of putting the right plate on the right tray, and the right tray on the right table can in some cases mean the difference between life and death. When you have to do this hundreds of times a day, day after day, the level of concentration and precision adds up to a phenomenal feat and service to those depending on the food for strength and healing.



Threads

She came for three weeks,
and stayed some thirty years
after a relief stint led to a temporary position.

Then war broke,
bringing with it
fast

reminders:

nothing
is ever more

than
temporary
and

what's temporary

is also
always

forever.

Commodities in short supply,
she alongside other seamstresses
found ways to mend
torn sheets and pillow slips,
blankets and gowns
for patients and staff
on wards and in theatre.

Working with what they had,
they somehow styled
uniforms, aprons, caps
and even veils from scratch

– the last technically unnecessary
yet symbolic, at the time,
and made more so, at the time,
for being so, a wordless gesture wrought
with needle, thread, and the precise grace



that is simply knowing
what can and must not be said.

Where might Nancy Long have gone?
What might she have done
had she not come for those three weeks
that became years?
Without a war, would she have stayed?
Perhaps there were plans
that fell through,
or maybe her job couldn't have arisen
if not for those sharp twists
of history?

Working six day weeks,
lunch hours just long enough
to scoff a single sandwich,
did Nancy sometimes dream
of another life, another world
with less death
and uncalloused fingers?

Did she sometimes draw
strange joys
fighting her own war
with stitches,
holding together so much
that could otherwise come undone – like surgeries,
wounds, and bones healed thanks in part
to clean linen
on the fresh beds of patients
who probably never knew what went on
in that sewing room, tucked away
like a crisp sheet corner.

All lives, in the end, are such fine
fabric things – easily tangled
and torn,
when necessary, mended or re-styled
from found scraps, whatever comes
to hand, calloused or not.
For aren't we all somehow sewn
in the same strange weave?
The threads so frayed, so fragile,
yet somehow, they stay fast



across seams, holes, divides.
Somehow it all holds
together.

Note on 'Threads'

This poem is based on a Forceps 'Personality Parade' feature on Mrs. Ann Long, who was known to co-workers as "Nancy". Nancy joined the hospital in 1939, initially to relieve her sister in Duncan Ward for a period of three weeks. She then took a temporary vacancy in the sewing room. Shortly after that, World War Two was announced. Linen services were crucial to the hospital during this period, and Nancy stayed to help service this demand. Because of the war, basic supplies were in short supply and the sewing room staff showed great creativity in their approaches to making and mending linen. They also had to work very long hours under physically demanding conditions. This poem celebrates their creative innovations and pays tributes to the personal sacrifices they made in service of others.



With / out any trace

Of all the hospital's histories,
why are those of cleaners
so hard to trace?
As though they sweep their very selves
away – along with dust, dirt, footprints
and finger-streak smudges on doors,
along with spilled blood, urine,
muscular, breath,
all the deaths
that could have bred there
had they not.

Florence Nightingale is regaled as nurse.
Yet she, too, was a cleaner.
In wars as well as pandemics,
simple hygiene saves more lives
than surgeons stitch together,
matters more to comfort
than any glow
of any lamp.

Yet so many people treat like dirt
those who keep us clean,
brushing lives aside like specks
of dandruff or strands of shed hair
– awkward reminders
of how being
human means being
animal and abject.

Is this why the greatest trace
of hospital cleaners
a century ago, and yesterday
is their tracelessness?

The ideal mark of a thorough clean
is that no mark be left behind
– an achievement visible only
through what is not seen
because it has been swept,
scrubbed, soaked or scratched
from view – or, failing that,
covered over, in service
of a saccharine illusion



that no blood was ever shed,
no fresh thing soiled.

This is the irony – and the art –
of cleaning: its object is to make all
its objects dis/appear
as though never there at all.

Note on 'With / out any trace'

This poem is based on an open letter Lewis N Galley, Foreman Porter of the A.C.H. wrote for Forceps in 1965. Lew sought to address the 'need for a greater understanding of the role they [Cleaners and Porters undertaking cleaning duties] carry out in Hospital life'. He emphasised that '[i]t does not matter what job we may do in life, we are never likely to give of our best if we feel that it is too lowly and unimportant to matter or if we are made to feel that we are a bit of a nuisance while we are doing it'. Thus deeming it 'unfortunate that even in these modern times when the need for hygiene is fully understood there are those who refer to a clear as "just one of the cleaners", forgetting that these people play a very important role in the successful care of the sick'. With reference to Florence Nightingale, he pointed out that no amount of nursing or medical care can be successful if clean environments are not provided for wound healing and infection control: 'the time spent on keeping the hospital clean is the most valuable time of your working life. When you are cleaning you are part of the fight against disease, and you are doing a major work in that fight.'

A South Australia's History Festival event, presented by the Women's & Children's Hospital Foundation's Arts in Health program through collaboration with the Women's and Children's Health Network's History and Heritage Collection.

