

THE SYDNEY HOMŒOPATHIC DISPENSARY

By Barbara Armstrong

Sydney Homœopathic Dispensary – first version

On 13th July 1858, a meeting of influential people determined to establish the Sydney Homœopathic Dispensary. The stated aim of the Dispensary was “*to enable the poor and working classes in Sydney and its neighbourhood to obtain the benefits of Homœopathy.*”

The first President was the Honourable W.P. Faithful, M.L.C. Arrangements were made with Mr John Bell and Mr A.R. Huntley to use a portion of their Pharmacy in George Street for the Dispensary. Dr Francis Bellamy and Dr Charles Meymott, at that time the only openly-declared homœopathic physicians in Sydney, gave their services to the Dispensary. John Bell was the Honorary Secretary and Samuel H. Smyth Esq was the Honorary Treasurer.

The institution was open for the reception of patients every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday at 3 pm, commencing the 26th July. The establishment was supported both by voluntary contributions and by a moderate subscribing charge to those who could afford it. According to the rules, every contributor of not less than one guinea was entitled to recommend two gratuitous patients for each guinea subscribed, and an unlimited number of subscribing patients. Gratuitous patients were able to obtain medical advice without payment, but had to pay sixpence for each prescription prepared at the pharmacy. Subscribing patients had to pay a weekly payment or 7s. 6d. per month for medical advice, and one shilling for each prescription prepared at the pharmacy.

The First Annual Report of the Dispensary was produced in 1859, with a list of subscribers (which included the Governor, Sir William Denison) and rules of the institute. It was announced that “the object they had in view in the establishment of the institute has fully realised their expectations”.

“About one hundred persons in poor circumstances have availed themselves of the advantages offered by the Dispensary; and although nearly all these were suffering from chronic diseases of long standing, and had been under other treatment, most of the patients have derived benefit and speak with gratitude of the manner in which they had been dealt with.”

In 1859 Dr Le Gay Brereton joined the medical staff.

At the third annual meeting in August 1861, it was reported that there was a steady increase in the number of poor persons who had availed themselves of the aid of the Dispensary. The number of patients having attended was 177, of which 138 were new and 39 old patients.

In the 1861-62 Annual Report, the following people were involved with the running of the Dispensary: President – Thomas S. Mort; Medical Officers – Drs Bellamy, Meymott, Brereton; Honorary Treasurer – Samuel H. Smyth; Honorary Secretary – John Bell; Committee – Rev. Canon Walsh, Benjamin Buchanan, John Keep, Michael Metcalfe, William Faithful, James Barlow, A.R. Huntley, Henry Prince, Samuel H. Smyth, William Jager.

The Dispensary was financed by donations, without any government subsidy, and already by 1861 the Annual Report outlined the urgent need for more donations.

The Dispensary also struggled to meet the needs of the people they were trying to help, because of the appalling living conditions of the poor at that time. The Second Annual Report of the Dispensary noted:

The Dispensary which had been established had now become a public benefit, but its usefulness had been much retarded, owing to the obstacles which the great poverty of the patients, and their insufficient food and shelter, placed in its way... Many of the patients now under treatment were so

poor, that they could not get the necessities of life; and the houses in which some of them lived, were almost roofless and with floors of mud. Thus the benefit they received from the science was rendered nugatory. If, under such circumstances, the patient recovered, it was in spite of the disadvantages referred to.

Sydney Homœopathic Dispensary – an interim solution

It appears that by November 1862 the dispensary had failed, as in that same month there appeared an advertisement placed by Dr Meymott:

HOMŒOPATHIC DISPENSARY – Until this institution is re-established, Dr Meymott MRCS &c will give advice to the poor and labouring classes on WEDNESDAYS and SATURDAYS at 3 pm. Terms 3s per week, or 9s per month, medicines included. Tickets for admission for the week or month may be obtained by applying to Dr Meymott, Bathurst-street, between George and Pitt streets. Private consultations as usual from 9 till 1 daily.

This advertisement continued through to June 1863, when Dr Meymott announced that he has moved to 123 Liverpool Street, facing Hyde Park, near Lyons Terrace. The Homœopathic Dispensary (temporary) was still held on the same days for the same rates.

Sydney Homœopathic Dispensary – a commercial version

At the beginning of October 1865, there appeared a notice to the effect that there was to be a meeting of Gentlemen favourable to the re-organisation of the Sydney Homœopathic Dispensary. The meeting was to be held at 323 George Street, which was the pharmacy owned by W. Larmer, who signed the notice as “Secretary pro tem”. When the meeting was eventually held, chaired by Mr John Lucas, MLA, it was reported that “resolutions favourable to the reorganisation of the institute were unanimously passed”.

W. Larmer had been a chemist and druggist and importer in various locations in George Street for many years. This was the first time, however, that he advertised his interest in homœopathy. All his previous advertisements were for standard allopathic and patent medicines. John Bell’s Homœopathic Pharmacy, also in George Street, was still in operation.

In anticipation of his proposal for a dispensary being accepted, Larmer announced that he had

regardless of expense, just completed extensive alterations in his establishment, and fitted up a separate and most complete Dispensary, with every appliance for the correct dispensing and preparation of Homœopathic prescriptions &c. In making this announcement, coupled with the fact of arrangements being entered into with the first London houses for monthly supplies of all the best and newest remedies, W.Larmer respectfully yet confidently solicits a share of public patronage.

Thereafter, W. Larmer advertised his business as the Sydney Homœopathic Dispensary, while John Bell advertised his business as the Sydney Homœopathic Pharmacy and Dispensary. Despite these titles, it appears that neither were run according to the previous principles for operating a dispensary for the poor. There appear to have been no election of office bearers and no public meetings. This competition between the two pharmacies resulted in a major price war for the sale of homœopathic medicines, books and medicine chests during 1866, which continued on and off until John Bell’s death in 1870.

Sydney Homœopathic Dispensary – third version

The establishment of a third Sydney Homeopathic Dispensary was announced in June, 1892. It commenced operation on 1st July, 1892 at 167 Liverpool Street.

Six homœopathic practitioners provided their services, one day each, every afternoon from Monday to Saturday: Dr H. Payne Scott, Dr Simmons, Dr Mathias, Dr Kyngdon, Dr Maffey and Dr W.G. Watson. The Honorary Dispensers were Fisher & Co of 337 George Street and J.T. Osmond & Co of 798 George Street.

The President was the Hon. Mr. Justice Windeyer; Vice-residents were Augustus Morris and Dr Kyngdon; Honorary Secretary was Dr Maffey; Honorary Treasurer was B. Backhouse.

The dispensary seems to have survived for only one year. Several of those involved with this dispensary, however, were involved a few years later in establishing the Sydney Homeopathic Hospital in 1902.