

THE MELBOURNE HOMŒOPATHIC DISPENSARY

By Barbara Armstrong

(Based on considerable original research by Barbara Armstrong, plus information from J. Templeton's book about Prince Henry's Hospital and its origins as a homœopathic dispensary)

Early Homœopathic Dispensaries

Prior to the establishment of the Melbourne Homœopathic Dispensary, run by public subscriptions, there were several people who established businesses with the label 'Homœopathic Dispensary'. Some specifically mentioned that they provided some services and advice free-of-charge.

The first such-named business, to my knowledge, was TH Goodwin, who established and advertised a homœopathic dispensary at 17 Stephen Street (now Exhibition Street) in 1854. Soon afterwards, however, Mr Goodwin left Melbourne.

In 1855, Dr Berigny advertised a homœopathic dispensary at 92 Collins Street East.

The First Meeting

The first meeting to discuss the formation of the Melbourne Homœopathic Dispensary was at the instigation of Dr Mackern, Surgeon of the London Homœopathic Hospital, who was visiting from England. The meeting was held at the Mechanics' Institute (which later became the Athenæum) on 14 April, 1859, 10 years prior to the final opening of the Dispensary. Those present included J.B. Hickson, T.H. Bérigny, S. Kidner, Mr Palk and Mr Heales, who was to become the Premier of Victoria.

A committee was formed. The members of the committee were:

The Very Rev. The Dean of Melbourne
Rev. Richard Fletcher, St Kilda
Rev. J. Turner, 43 Condell St, Collingwood
Richard Heales, Esq., M.L.A. Elizabeth Street
J.A. Mouritz, Esq., 16 Queen Street
J.J. Crouch, Esq, 41 Swanston Street (an architect)
J.G. Foxton, Esq., 87 Flinders Street West (of Foxton, Jones & Co, commission agents)
John Henry Clough, Esq, 111 Collins Street West (of JH Cough & Co, wool brokers and stock agents)
A.B. Orlebar, Esq, Toorak
J.B. Carr, Esq, 1 Flinders Lane West (of JB Carr & Co, wholesale coffee and spice dealers)
J.S. Chambers, Esq, Swanston St - Honorary Secretary (of Messrs W. Powell & Co, wholesale & retail ironmongers)
Thomas Mackern, Esq, MRCS, 159 Collins Street East (a boarding house)
Dr Berigny, 119 Collins Street East
Dr Palk, Coventry Street, Emerald Hill
Dr Hickson, St Kilda

The following week they placed an advertisement asking for donations and subscriptions towards the foundation of the homœopathic dispensary.

In mid-May they announced that the Melbourne Homœopathic Dispensary was available for business at 81 Collins Street East, adjoining the Mechanical Institution (the Athanaeum). Hours of attendance were from 3-5 pm on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, and from 1 to 3pm on Fridays and Saturdays.

Although Dr Mackern realized that “Doctors” Hickson, Bérigny and Palk were not legally qualified and recognised, he expected that Dr. Brereton, of Bradford, would arrive any day soon, and would continue the work already achieved. Under these circumstances, he felt justified in recommending that the committee should entrust the medical service of the dispensary to the above people.

Dr Mackern returned to England soon after the meeting. He later reported that the meeting did not result in a dispensary being established. While it had been hoped that Dr Brereton would take up this opportunity, in the event, he continued his travels and moved to Sydney instead, joining the staff of the Sydney Homœopathic Dispensary.

As a result, the essential office of physician to the institution remained unfilled. On reconsideration, most members of the committee refused to recognise the unqualified practitioners, in order to preserve the reputation of homœopathy in the community. It was found necessary, therefore, to keep the doors closed till the arrival of a qualified practitioner.

In place of the desired Melbourne Homœopathic Dispensary, in May 1860 Samuel Kidner advertised that he ran a homœopathic dispensary at his premises in St Kilda. During the same year, however, he joined in a partnership with Mr Gould, and established the Kidner and Gould Homœopathic Pharmacy in Collins Street East.

The Second Attempt

On 6 September 1862, a notice appeared in The Argus:

HOMŒOPATHY – A PUBLIC DISPENSARY will be OPENED
On Monday September 8 at 90 Collins Street East.
Consultations gratis before 10 o’clock daily.
Consulting physician and surgeon Dr Ray LRCP, MRCS, late
House-Surgeon to the London Homœopathic Hospital, &c.

This was on the same premises as Gould’s Homœopathic Pharmacy (originally Kidner & Gould’s Homœopathic Pharmacy).

Two other advertisements appeared at the same time – one for Gould’s pharmacy, called the Melbourne Homœopathic Pharmacy, and another for Dr Ray’s private practice, also at the 90 Collins Street East address.

It appears that this arrangement did not last, however. Once again, Melbourne was without a public homœopathic dispensary.

The Melbourne Homœopathic Dispensary

In 1869 three homœopathic physicians - Dr Robert Ray, Dr James Pascoe Teague and Dr J.W. Günt, met at the rooms of Gould and Martin’s homœopathic pharmacy to continue discussing plans regarding the opening of a homœopathic dispensary in Melbourne. On 30 October these practitioners and a group of influential lay friends of homœopathy (including the Dean of Melbourne and leading business and professional men) discussed final plans to open the Melbourne Homœopathic Dispensary. Its aim was to provide free medical services to the sick

poor of Melbourne and the inner suburbs according to the principles of homœopathy. They appointed the three doctors as Honorary Medical Officers. (Dr Günst gave his medical services to the Dispensary until 1873, when he resigned his honorary medical post, although he remained on the Board of Management of the Hospital until 1893.)

The Establishment

A house was leased at 153 Collins Street East*, one of the three houses which had previously been occupied by Günst's Hydropathic Institution. However it was old and in bad repair, with makeshift provisions for furniture, much of it loaned by Dr Günst. The Secretary thought that the back rooms were "positively unhealthy" because the roof leaked continually and in 1875, after a storm, the ceiling of one room fell in.

They advertised the Dispensary widely in the daily newspapers, and with placards on suburban railway stations. They also opened subscription lists to raise funds. On 22nd November the dispensary doors opened to the public.

The Dispensary was very busy and successful right from the outset. It opened three days a week from 9 to 10am. In its first year it treated 741 patients, and by 1872, 1,116 patients. By 1871 there were seldom fewer than 15 or 20 patients in attendance during dispensary hours, and the committee claimed that sometimes there were as many as 90 or 95.

The Dispensary was run by a committee elected annually by the subscribers. Like the medical staff, the committee members gave their services free to the sick poor. The only two people to receive any payment were the "Collector" who was appointed to help bring in funds, on which he received a small commission, and a clinical clerk who was engaged in 1872 to relieve the pressure on the medical officers.

Financial Difficulties

Right from the beginning, the problem for the founders was their ability to obtain finances, especially as governments of the time considered that it was the duty of private citizens, not the government, to establish institutions for the sick poor. The main source of income was private charity. The Government did distribute an annual grant to Victoria's charities, but every year the Dispensary's Secretary had to write letters to politicians and organise deputations to the Treasurer in order to put forward their claims. When the Government reduced their grant in 1872 and 1873, the Committee was forced to order the doctors to turn many patients away and admit only the most urgent cases.

Moves Towards the Establishment of a Hospital

During 1874 a Homœopathic Hospital Committee was established by a number of influential women, which operated as a separate Committee for a while until it amalgamated with the Dispensary. The Dispensary operated until 1876, at which time the Melbourne Homœopathic Hospital opened at 17 Spring Street (on the west side, between Flinders Street and "Little Flinders Street"), in a building which had been the Sick Children's Hospital, before it moved. The building was renovated, and operated from these temporary quarters until the new hospital in St Kilda Road was finished. The Spring Street building incorporated an out-patient department as well as 14 beds for in-patients. In 1884 the Patron was His Excellency the Governor, and the President was Sir W. Foster Stawell. By that time they had a phone number – Tel. No. 318.