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**Australian doctors at war. A literature review.**

**Part One: Up to the evacuation of Gallipoli <sup>1.2</sup>**

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**Introduction**

This review aims to cover the whole field of published literature relating to the war service of Australian doctors. It is adapted from the introduction to my bibliography on this subject, which is now out of print but is available in the AMMA library. <sup>1</sup>

Our understanding of any body of literature depends in part on background knowledge. The two areas especially relevant to the literature about Australian doctors at war are (a) the histories of the wars in which the action takes place, and (b) the development and organisation of the Australian armed forces medical services.

It is not difficult to find background reading material on any war in which Australian medical personnel have been involved, and some suitable resources are mentioned in this review. However the problem of becoming acquainted with the development and organisation of medical services in the Australian forces is more difficult, as there is no comprehensive work on this topic. The period prior to Federation is quite well covered by several authors (see below). The rapid expansion of the medical services in the major wars is documented in the official histories of the medical services, but in too much detail for the general reader. The period between the two World Wars is covered succinctly by Allan S. Walker (see under World War II). However, there are many gaps in the overall picture.

In compiling the bibliography, I originally built up a database, over a period of about five years, using my own collection and those of the major libraries, and aided by computerised library catalogues, periodical indexes, and printed bibliographies in related fields. <sup>2.5</sup> Since then I have continued to add to the database, which now contains about 800 records of individual publications (books, reprints, and serial titles) and of articles published in journals. The specifically medical references in this review number about 200, concentrating on official histories, and first hand reports by doctors in the field. Clinical material is not included.

**The nineteenth century**

Imperial troops were withdrawn from Australia in 1870, leaving the colonies to fend for themselves. Each colony had a small enlisted force, supported by volunteers and, in some cases, a partly paid militia. The medical service was not well developed, except in NSW, where W.D.C. Williams became the Principal Medical Officer of the New South Wales Medical Staff Corps (est. 1888). This in turn became, under his guidance, the New South Wales Army Medical Corps (1898). The NSWAMC served with distinction in South Africa and proved the value of some innovative ideas of its commanding officer. On 30 July 1902, the old colonial medical units were amalgamated to form the Australian Army Medical Corps. The history of the service in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is covered succinctly by several writers, including A.G. Butler, the medical war historian. <sup>6.9</sup>

Prior to the Sudan campaign in 1885, none of the colonial medical units had been to war.. However some individual Australian doctors had served in European conflicts, and two produced published accounts relating to the 1870s: J.P. Ryan wrote of his experiences in the Franco-German War (1870-71),<sup>10,11</sup> while C.S. Ryan recounted his experiences in the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878), in which he served first with the Turks (at the siege of Plevna) and later with an English relief team assisting them (at Erzeroum).<sup>12,14</sup>

### **The Sudan Campaign (1885)**

In 1885, after the murder of General Gordon at Khartoum, a contingent of seven hundred and sixty-five troops was sent from New South Wales to assist British forces in the Sudan.<sup>15,16</sup> They left Sydney on the 3<sup>rd</sup> March and were back there on the 23<sup>rd</sup> June, fortunately having seen little conflict. A small medical unit, including three doctors, went with them. This was the first Australian military medical detachment to go on active service. The medical officer in charge was W.D.C. Williams, who is generally regarded as the 'father' of the Army medical services in Australia. Williams ultimately retired from the AIF early in the World War I, but reached the height of his achievement in the Boer War. His military career has been quite extensively documented, notably by Gurners. Some recent publications refer to the Sudan contingent's medical service.<sup>7,8</sup> Williams himself published a brief account of the medical aspects of the Sudan expedition.<sup>17</sup>

### **Abyssinian War (1897-8)**

T.H. Fiaschi served with the Italian Army in this war against the Ethiopians.<sup>18,19</sup> He later served with the NSWAMC in South Africa, and as CO of No.3 AGH at Lemnos in World War I.

### **Boer War (1899-1902)**

The Boer War was fought between Great Britain and the two Boer republics (Transvaal and Orange Free State).<sup>20</sup> The Boers had the upper hand in the beginning, and the British were besieged at Ladysmith and Mafeking, but large numbers of British reinforcements ultimately resolved the issue in Britain's favour – the British force numbering over 500 000 against less than 100 000 Boers. After 1900 the Boers fought a guerilla war, to which the British responded with a brutal but effective scorched earth policy.

Because of the rudimentary state of the army medical service in the other colonies, the Australian medical contingents to the Boer War came largely from New South Wales. Three contingents of the NSWAMC went to South Africa under W.D.C. Williams. The first left Australia in October 1899, the second in January 1900, and the third in March 1901. A fourth medical contingent, drawn from all over Australia, and known as the Australian Commonwealth Army Medical Corps. sailed in February 1902. The official history of the four medical contingents appears in the Official record of the Australian military contingents to South Africa.<sup>21</sup>

Among the medical officers with Williams in the first contingent were Fiaschi and A.E. Perkins. After returning home Williams, Perkins and Fiaschi wrote extensive accounts of their experiences and the exploits of the Corps. These were published in The Story of South Africa and can be regarded as an unofficial 'official history' of the Australian Army medical services in the war.<sup>22,23</sup> Others also published account to their experiences, notably Robert Scot Skirving,<sup>24,25</sup> who has a fine, if somewhat idiosyncratic

style. Shorter first-hand accounts are those of Sir T.N. Fitzgerald,<sup>26.27</sup> consultant surgeon and Honman from Victoria and Douglas from Adelaide, who were regimental medical officers.<sup>28-30</sup>

The most written-about Australian doctor in this conflict is N.R. Howse. Who won the Victoria Cross for his actions at Vredefort on the 4th of June 1900:

'Lieutenant N.R. Howse, New South Wales Army Medical Corps, seeing a trumpeter fall, rode out to his assistance. His horse was shot under him, but he continued on foot, dressed the soldier's wounds and carried him back through heavy crossfire to shelter'.<sup>31</sup>

Howse was the first Australian, and remains the only Australian doctor to have been awarded the VC. He later became Director of Medical Services in the AIF. Director - General of Medical Services in Australia and a federal government Minister.<sup>32-39</sup>

### **Boxer Rebellion (1900)**

G.E. Morrison, from Geelong, was *The Times* correspondent in Peking during the Boxer Rebellion.<sup>40</sup> Morrison seems to have written fought and doctored with equal verve in Peking. He was a gifted writer, and his formal accounts of this conflict are gems of descriptive prose.<sup>41.42</sup> There was also an official Australian force in the Boxer Rebellion known as the China Naval Contingent.<sup>43</sup> Staff-Surgeon Steel, who was a medical officer with the contingent, died on active service in China.<sup>44</sup>

### **World War I**

The full destructive power of 'civilisation' was unleashed in this war on a scale which is little understood today. Britain and the dominions put over six million troops in the field. Their casualties exceeded three million and of those more than one million were killed in action or died of their wounds.<sup>45</sup>

A useful overview of Australian military involvement in World War I is given in the current edition of the Australian Encyclopaedia.<sup>4</sup> Few now will read the monumental official histories, but many could read with profit *Anzac to Amiens*. A masterpiece of C.E.W. Bean.<sup>46</sup> In round figures, Australia raised 400 000 troops for this war. Among them there were over 200 000 casualties, of whom 60 000 were killed in action or died of their wounds.

About 1 300 of Australia's 3 000 doctors served in the armed forces in World War I. More detailed figures were given by Fetherston at a special meeting of the Council of the Victorian Branch of the BMA,<sup>47</sup> and reviewed by Mitchell.<sup>48</sup> According to the *Medical Journal of Australia*,<sup>49</sup> over 500 doctors had joined the AAMC by October 1915, and a further 200, many of whom had joined up very early in the war, were serving with the RAMC. Some of these had been in England at the outbreak of war. Among the first doctors to leave Australia for overseas service after the war commenced were those known as 'Kitchener's Hundred'.<sup>50</sup> Some, such as the talented writer A.L. McLean, started with the RAMC and later joined units of the AIF.

### **Medical Casualties**

The first Australian doctor killed on active service in World War I was B.C.A. Pockley, who at the time was with the First Australian Military Expedition to New Guinea. He was shot at Herbertshoe, on December 11<sup>th</sup>, 1914, after giving his red cross armband to a soldier who was helping the wounded.<sup>51</sup> Smithurst states that, by 1917, one thousand Australian doctors were in France or Palestine, and over 50 had died on active service.<sup>52</sup> The Medical Journal of Australia in 1918 gave the names of seventy-five Australian doctors who had died on active service in the war.<sup>53</sup>

### **The Official History**

The publications describing the war service of these doctors are dominated by the monumental work of A.G. Butler, whose official history of the Australian Army Medical Services appeared in three volumes and a supplement.<sup>54</sup> Most of this work was written by Butler himself, although sections were contributed by R.M. Downes (Sinai and Palestine), and Maguire and Cilento (New Guinea). The work was an enormous undertaking, from the first call for contributions in 1919 to its completion in 1943, over twenty-five years later.<sup>55</sup>

### **Egypt**

Late in 1914 the first contingents of the newly-formed Australian Imperial Force, under General Bridges, sailed for Egypt, there to establish base camps in the desert preparatory to taking part in the war in Europe. On the way to Egypt their escort, *HMAS Sydney*, was able to trap and destroy the German raider Emden. The senior medical officer on *HMAS Sydney* during this engagement, L. Darby, published several reports of his experiences.<sup>56.59</sup>

Once arrived in Egypt, the AAMC established its base hospitals, No.1 AGH and No.2 AGH. J.W. Barrett worked tirelessly to build up the strength of No.1 AGH in the Heliopolis Palace Hotel. He and J.E.F. Deane later wrote a book, *The Australian Army Medical Corps in Egypt*.<sup>60</sup> Barrett also recorded his experiences in two elegantly written short pieces.<sup>61.62</sup> Other doctors wrote articles describing their experiences in Egypt: Summons produced a brief description of medical life at the Heliopolis Palace Hotel with No.1 AGH;<sup>63.64</sup> and J.B. Nash wrote a series of articles for the Medical Journal of Australia - the first aboard ship, the others in Egypt - giving a lively account of life at Mena House, home of No.2 AGH.<sup>65.68</sup>

### **Gallipoli**

From Egypt the Anzacs went by ship to Gallipoli, where they landed at dawn on the 25<sup>th</sup> April 1915. The medical officers immediately found themselves in difficulties because of lack of shelter from enemy fire and a great number of casualties. Throughout the campaign, medical arrangements involved doctors on the peninsula gathering in the wounded who were then transferred to hospital ships and taken to the base hospitals on Lemnos and in Egypt. Doctors 'at Gallipoli' were therefore either on land or in the ships collecting the wounded. Apart from the Official History (volume one of Butler), there is recent, major work by M.B. Tyquin, who examines the organisation of medical services at Gallipoli detail.<sup>69</sup> Australian doctors at Gallipoli formed a medical society known as 'The Anzac Medical Association', the activities of which were reported in the *Medical Journal of Australia*.<sup>10</sup>

There are a number of notable work by doctors describing their experiences in the campaign of 1915. J.L. Beeston, CO of the Fourth Field Ambulance, wrote a book, *Five Months at Anzac*, which is recognised as one of the best personal accounts of the war <sup>71</sup> A shortened version appeared in the *Medical Journal of Australia*.<sup>12</sup> J.W.B. Bean, brother of the military historian, published a series of 'Reminiscences' of the 3rd Battalion at Gallipoli, from the unique perspective of the RMO. Carefully written, but in a colloquial 'man-to-man' style, these convey something of the ethos of the Anzacs.<sup>73.85</sup>  
There are a number of other short pieces by medical officers describing their experiences.<sup>86,95</sup>

H.M. Moran, an outstanding medical writer, provided a potent account of his war experience in his autobiography. He served off Gallipoli in a 'travesty of a hospital ship' (a converted cattle carrier), and his description of the nocturnal disposal of the dead in the sea 'by Samothrace' makes chilling reading.<sup>96</sup> Other doctors who wrote of their experiences on hospital ships off Gallipoli were Syme,<sup>97.98</sup> Aspinall,<sup>99</sup> and Poate.<sup>100</sup> H.J. Stewart and J. Morton wrote of their experiences at No.3 AGH, which was established on Lemnos.<sup>101,102</sup>

Gallipoli was evacuated in December 1915, in one of the most remarkable withdrawals in military history, using a plan conceived by the Australian General C.B.B. White. One of the first of many published accounts of this operation was written by a medical veteran, J.W. Springthorpe.<sup>103</sup> The campaign at Gallipoli has inspired many notable works of literature, including some by medical authors. At least four Australian doctors published contemporary poems about Gallipoli. C.H. Souter, although he was not there, wrote two stirring poems ('The Tenth' and 'The Toast').<sup>104-105</sup> Another poem about Gallipoli was published by W.M. Anderson, who had served in the Boer War while a medical student, but had been disabled since in an accident.<sup>106</sup> A fine work is the poem *Alma Mater* by Prof. H.B. Allen of Melbourne, with its haunting introduction *Australia's Dead*.<sup>109</sup> Two poems written by J. Sprent at Gallipoli were published in the *Anzac Book*.<sup>106-101</sup>

Bury the body - it has served its ends;  
Mark not the spot, but "On Gallipoli" Let it be said, "he  
died". Oh, Hearts of Friends,  
If I am worth it, keep my memory.

-Capt. James Sprent, AAMC (3<sup>rd</sup> Field Ambulance).<sup>107</sup>

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