

Obituary

Captain Charles Fison AAMC (1908 - 1999): A short biography of a paediatrician-soldier¹

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The domain of military medicine has traditionally encompassed the disciplines of high-energy trauma management, tropical medicine, the management of the epidemic diseases of the Army and Navy and the ethos of preventive medicine. In the Australian Defence Force, unlike responsibilities undertaken by Service doctors in the United States, paediatrics and child care has not held a prominent place until the last decade of the twentieth century.

As the twentieth century ends, an audit of Australia's international operational deployments of recent years has shown that more than half have involved significant paediatric and child care. Deployments to Somalia and Rwanda, to Cambodia and to Papua New Guinea have included major core elements of paediatric care. In this context it is appropriate to review briefly the life of one of Australia's pioneer specialist paediatricians, and his uniformed service during the Second World War.

The Hospital for Sick Children in Brisbane, later (in 1944) named the Brisbane Children's Hospital, and later still (in 1968) renamed the Royal Children's Hospital, has had an outstanding tradition of combined civilian and military service. The senior paediatrician (1911-1922) at that Hospital was Dr A.Graham Butler (later Colonel Butler DSO, VD; 1873-1949), a leading doctor-soldier at Gallipoli, who went on to be a founder of the Australian War Memorial and the official Medical War Historian (World War One) for Australia. Butler served also as the professional predecessor to the writer as the senior paediatrician at the Royal Children's Hospital (1919-1923); and laid a foundation of traditions of service which continue to the present day. Other paediatricians and paediatric surgeons from the Royal Children's Hospital in Brisbane who served throughout the Second World War on operational deployments were Group Captain Sydney Fancourt McDonald (1885-1947), founder of the Melbourne University Rifles and later the Senior Paediatrician who followed Colonel A.G. Butler at the Hospital for Sick Children in Brisbane. Other paediatrician-soldiers have included Colonel Harold Forbes, Senior Paediatrician at that Hospital; and Colonel Peter Grant, Senior Surgeon and later Medical Superintendent. Both served as Representative Honorary Colonels of the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps. In this tradition of paediatric and military service also served Captain David Charles Fison AAMC, whose death in September 1999 saw the last of the paediatric physician-surgeon generalists who had rendered service in the Australian Army Medical Corps.

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Captain David Charles Fison AAMC (1908-1999), paediatrician and soldier; and the longest serving Superintendent of the Royal Children's Hospital, Brisbane. Shown in his uniform of the Australian Army Medical Corps, 1941.

Captain David Charles Fison (1908-1999) was one of the longest serving Medical Superintendents of any Children's Hospital; and one of the pioneers of the specialty of paediatrics as that term is used and understood today. He served in uniform during the Second World War whilst appointed as Senior Registrar at the Hospital for Sick Children in Brisbane. At a time of serious manpower shortage, and when there was an enormous clinical load of sick children in southern Queensland, he could not be released for overseas service although such postings had been promulgated on several occasions. This account records some of the details of his life.

David Charles Fison was born on the 7th July, 1908, the second son of David Fison, the Engineer to the Department of Harbours and Rivers, at the Port of Brisbane. He completed a Master of Science degree at the University of Queensland, but was retrenched during the Great Depression. In 1933 he enrolled in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Sydney, graduating MB BS in 1937. In 1937 he was appointed as Junior Resident Medical Officer at the Hospital for Sick Children in Brisbane, serving continuously at that Hospital until his retirement in 1974. In 1946 he was appointed Medical Superintendent of the (renamed) Brisbane Children's Hospital, a position he occupied continuously for the next 28 years. During this extended period he helped in the training of a generation of graduating doctors from the University of Queensland; and was part of a great tradition of doctor-soldiers who either as fulltime staff members, or as Visiting Physicians and Surgeons, became leaders in the discipline of military medicine in Australia. He brought to Servicemen and women a special sympathy, and an understanding of the demands that such make on the institution in which they serve. He is recalled as a man of uncompromising integrity in every aspect of his personal and professional life. As the "live-in" Superintendent at the (renamed) Royal Children's Hospital in Brisbane, he cared for several thousand junior doctors who passed through that Hospital; and for tens of thousands of children for whom, as Medical Superintendent, he accepted ultimate care. He was one of the pioneers of paediatric electrocardiology in Australia; and for more than two decades taught registrars and residents the special skills of paediatric ECG interpretation. He rendered singular service to the Royal Queensland Bush Children's Health Scheme, serving in an executive capacity from 1946 until 1992. His advocacy was to become part of the terms of reference of that splendid institution which offered a "home away from home" to many thousands of children who would otherwise never have had the opportunity to receive tertiary medical care, or even to visit a capital or ever see the sea.

Fison enlisted in the Australian Army Medical Corps, and served throughout the Second World War with the rank of Captain. His civilian position was declared a Reserved Occupation, and although posted overseas on two occasions, he was unable to leave the Hospital because of his primary commitments to sick children. The war years were an era when desperate parents had little chance of

access to specialist paediatricians. It was a time still of diphtheria and poliomyelitis epidemics; and a time when Captain Fison could be seen running, in his pyjamas at all hours of the night, to perform an emergency life-saving tracheostomy on a child suffocating from epiglottitis or diphtheria.

As part of his duty in the Australian Army Medical Corps, he attended extensively at nights and weekends to service Immunisation Parades. He is remembered extensively for his meticulous attention to detail, and in this role was particularly adept and valued for undertaking uncountable numbers of Service Medical Examinations. After demobilisation, and following his appointment as Medical Superintendent (in 1946), he remained the life-long professional colleague of many of the paediatric doctor-soldiers who returned to work at the Hospital. Such included the young spitfire pilot, Dr Kenneth Mitchell; and also Colonel (later Brigadier) Sir Kenneth Fraser, the irascible senior surgeon at the Royal Children's Hospital who was the Director of Medical Services for Northern Command, prior to and immediately after the Second World War. Captain Fison created an administrative ethos of sympathetic encouragement for doctors at the Children's Hospital who wished to render such military service to their country; and for such he is particularly remembered.