
PAVING THE WAY – OUR EARLY WOMEN



ROYAL AUSTRALASIAN
COLLEGE OF SURGEONS



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CONSTANCE ELIZABETH D'ARCY

(1889-1946)



Born in 1879 in Rylstone NSW, Constance D'Arcy was educated at the local primary school and Riviera College, Woollahra. Her father, a local policeman and a keen bibliophile, imbued his large family with a love of books and learning.

Constance began her long association with the University of Sydney in 1898, completing her MB ChM in 1904. As neither of the Sydney teaching hospitals accepted women, she did her residency at the (Royal) Adelaide Hospital. Returning to Sydney in 1905, she was the first resident medical officer appointed to the Royal Hospital for Women in Paddington. By 1908 she was honorary surgeon (Gynaecology & Obstetrics) at the hospital and was keen to improve nursing standards. She was later instrumental in forming the Royal Australian Nursing Federation.



Photo: RACS Archive.



2nd AGM, March, 1929, Photo: RACS Archive.

An advocate for the role of women, Constance was involved in groups such as the Women's Medical Society of NSW and in 1922, she was one of the six women founders of the 'New Hospital for Women and Children', which was renamed the Rachel Forster Hospital in 1925 and relocated to Redfern.

In 1925 she was appointed as honorary surgeon at St Vincent's Hospital and it was here that a young Douglas Miller (College President 1957-1959) met her. He noted:

The gynaecologists were an interesting group. There was Constance d'Arcy, a large jovial lady very involved in university politics. She loved gossip and over the cream cakes which she enjoyed at tea one heard some intriguing bits of professional news...

Constance had resumed her involvement with the University of Sydney in 1919 when she became a Fellow of the Senate. In 1922 when the National Council of Women suggested a chair of obstetrics at the University, Constance '...assisted the passage of the proposal through faculty and senate...' A lecturer in clinical obstetrics at the University (1924-1939), Constance was the first woman to be elected Deputy Chancellor (1943-1946). She became a Dame of the Order of the British Empire in 1936.

Although Lilian Violet Cooper was the first woman to become a Fellow of the College, she was closely followed by Constance D'Arcy (Foundation Fellow, no. 201). An active Fellow of the College – Constance was the only female Fellow to attend the AGM in 1929 and at the 1938 meeting, gave a paper entitled: 'Demonstration of cases, and Gynaecological Operations'.

A caring woman with an infectious laugh, Constance was generous with her time and attentive to her patients and students. She was fond of wearing antique jewellery and 'when on her rounds, one of the first tasks of the sister on duty was to lock it away.' Her contribution to the role of women in surgery, clinical teaching and obstetrics; and university governance, was prodigious. In later life, she developed cerebral arteriopathy and died in 1950.

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JEAN LITTLEJOHN

(1899-1990)



Born in Nelson, New Zealand, Jean Littlejohn's family originally came from Scotland and moved to Melbourne in 1904 when her father became Principal of Scotch College. Although educated at the Presbyterian Ladies College, Jean regarded herself as 'the only girl who ever went to Scotch'. She followed her two brothers into Medicine at the University of Melbourne, graduating in 1922.

Desperate for a resident's post at the Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital Jean waited 4 months for a position:

During that 4 months I haunted the Out-Patients Department, attending every Clinic, both Eye and E.N.T, listening to the words of wisdom being dropped by the fine honoraries, watching them at work and noting their methods of treatment, acting as a dog's body, even a chucker out...

Interested in the fledgling specialty of ENT, she became medical superintendent of the Eye and Ear in 1923. She practiced in both disciplines and commented:

One of the worst duties was the application of leeches which were used for iritis, glaucoma, red eyes etc. these vile things were kept in a huge glass jar in the Dispensary. One bravely plunged the hand and arm in, grabbed 1,2,3 and put them in a little pill box. A little milk was smeared at the corner of the affected eye or mastoid, the box inverted and the leeches induced to bite.

Working as an ENT specialist, Jean and her brothers set up a private practice in the 1920s. She became Assistant surgeon at the Eye and Ear in 1929 and in 1933, was the first person to be awarded a Diploma in Laryngology & Otology from University of Melbourne. In the same year, Jean was appointed Senior Surgeon at the Eye and Ear and commented that she was:

...far too young at thirty-four years of age, but I loved the work and I loved the hospital.

Serving as an ENT surgeon during World War 2, Jean's abilities were again recognised in 1947 when she was appointed Clinical Dean of the Eye and Ear Hospital and elected to the Faculty of Medicine at University of Melbourne.



Ian Taylor & Jean Littlejohn, Photo: RVEEH.

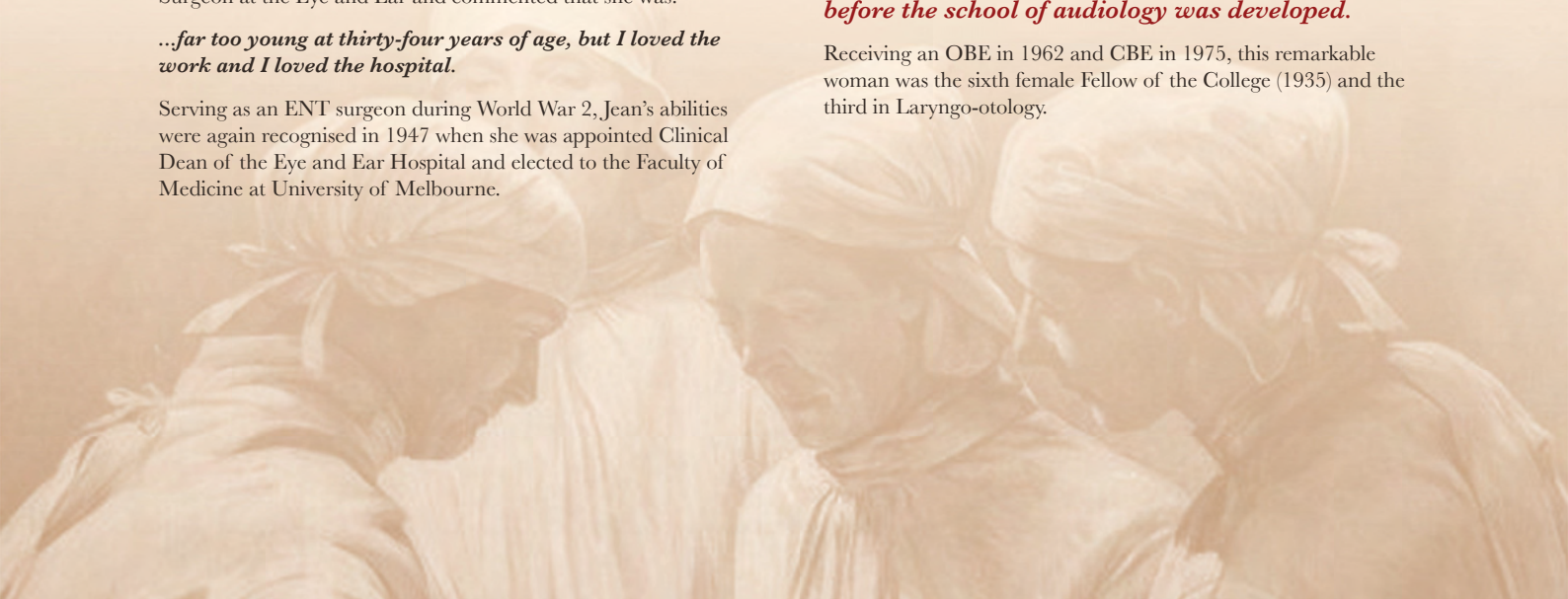
Ostensibly, she retired from the Eye and Ear Hospital in 1952 but this was not really the case. Five years later, she established the Jean Littlejohn Deafness Investigation and Research Unit at the Eye and Ear. The unit pioneered the use of hearing aids for babies. It was not always an easy task:

It was only after persuasion and, I might tell you, almost threats that I was able to get aids for babies through the Commonwealth Acoustic laboratories. They thought I was mad.

She also worked with Professor Graeme Clark, creator of the bionic ear who noted that 'she mixed well in a male dominated specialty' and was:

...the first in Australia to develop procedures for evaluating hearing loss in young children well before the school of audiology was developed.

Receiving an OBE in 1962 and CBE in 1975, this remarkable woman was the sixth female Fellow of the College (1935) and the third in Laryngo-otology.



JEAN SANDEL

(1916-1974)



Born in Kaiti, Gisborne to Mary and Arthur Sandel, a licensed surveyor, Jean Sandel spent her early years in Taumarunui - near Lake Taupo in New Zealand's north island. An only child, she boarded at New Plymouth Girls High School and was Dux of the School and Head Boarder in 1933. Obtaining a national scholarship, she attended Otago University and was awarded undergraduate prizes including the Senior and Travelling scholarships.

Jean obtained her MB ChB in 1940, and possibly due to the shortage of surgeons during the war, was able to practice as a general surgeon at the Wellington Hospital. After the war she went overseas and spent the next four years working as a surgical registrar in London and doing postgraduate work. In 1947, she became the first New Zealand woman to gain Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons of England.

Her appointment as specialist surgeon at the New Plymouth Hospital in 1950 was to continue for the rest of her working life. By 1964, she was the leader of the surgical department and noting the lack of modern facilities, actively campaigned for a new hospital. She was rewarded when the Taranaki Base Hospital opened in 1972, complete with seven operating theatres.



Photo: Te Ara.



Photo: Taranaki Daily News.

Jean was diminutive (just over five feet tall) and operated standing on a box so that her assistants would not have to stoop. Ted Watson had little personal contact with Jean but remembers attending a theatre session:

...where I observed with much admiration and pleasure, the skill and confidence which she so clearly showed. Afterwards, she discussed the case in question in some detail which demonstrated a clear ability as a teacher of her subject.

Considered a stern disciplinarian amongst the hospital staff, she had a strong Christian faith and was concerned for both her staff and patients. She worked all hours and was 'known to deliver a box of groceries to men she had operated on and she knew were struggling to return to work.' She was also an advocate for young women, encouraging them to further their academic studies in medicine.

Obtaining her FRACS in 1957, her later interests included pioneering cardiovascular surgery in provincial hospitals.

Jean Sandel had a hidden passion – she loved sport, particularly football and cricket. When working at New Plymouth:

She was known to sneak away to Pukekura Park to watch cricket matches. A match commentator would hang a white towel out of the commentary box if the hospital needed her urgently and she would scurry back up the hill.

Although subjected to radiotherapy during her final illness, she not only continued working but also cared for her dying mother. Jean was found dead in her bed on 4 November 1974.

LORNA VERDUN SISLEY

(1916-2004)



In the late 1930s Lorna Sisley desperately wanted to study medicine and importuning her mother to persuade her father, she said:

If I can't practice medicine, I will be no good for anything else.

Born in Wangaratta to master butcher, Harrie Sisley and his wife, Ivy, Lorna attended Wangaratta High School before boarding at the Methodist Ladies College in Kew. Although her father was not interested in educating women, believing that they were only suitable for marriage, he allowed Lorna to start a science degree at the University of Melbourne.

Influenced by second year medical student Gladys Saunders, who showed her the anatomy school, and supported by her Aunt Beth McFarlane, who approached professors on her behalf, Lorna transferred to second year medicine in 1937. She boarded with the McFarlanes, who owned a hosiery factory, and Lorna noted that helping to mix dyes at the factory gave her some practical experience in chemistry.

There were only 10 women amongst 100 medical students at the University – and Lorna's career was spectacularly successful, winning prizes throughout her course. She later learnt that whenever she won a prize, her father would shout drinks at the Wangaratta hotel. Despite the interference of a male student who sabotaged her stethoscope, Lorna finished third in the year in 1942 and was awarded the Michael Ryan Scholarship in Surgery.

Joining St Vincent's Hospital for her residency, Lorna was mentored by Leo Doyle who at a time when women tended to specialise in Obstetrics and Gynaecology, encouraged her to specialise in General Surgery. In 1947 Lorna became the first woman in Victoria to obtain a FRACS in General Surgery. She also became an anatomy demonstrator at the University of Melbourne and began her Master of Surgery, graduating in 1949. In 1947 Lorna had joined the Queen Victoria Hospital as general surgeon. She became senior surgeon in 1957 and was to remain at the hospital for the next 34 years.

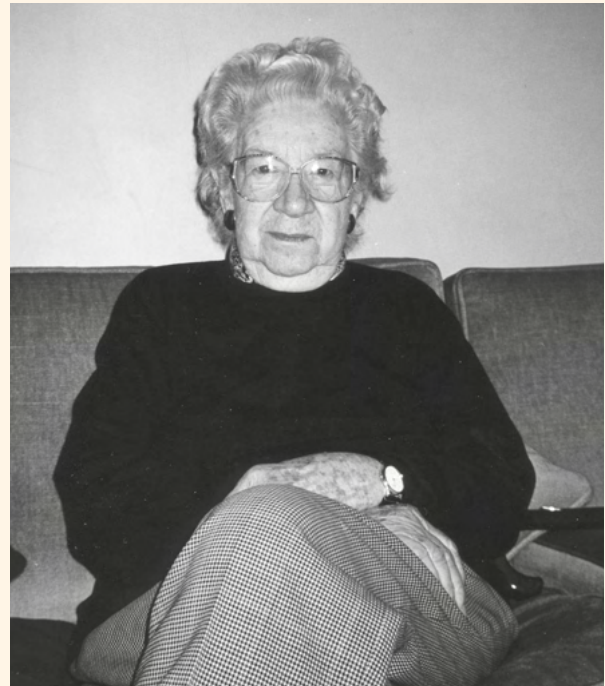


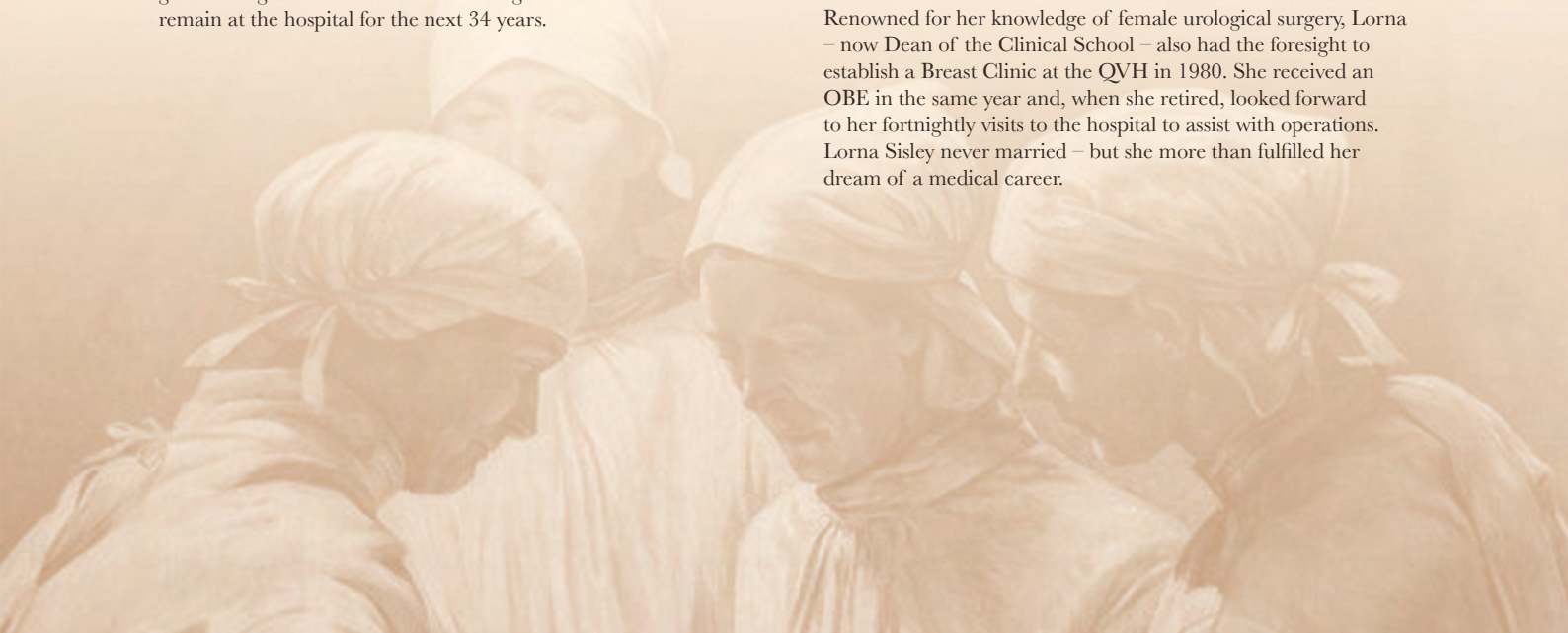
Photo: RACS Archive.

A seminal point in Lorna's career was being awarded the Gordon Craig Travelling Fellowship in 1949. It allowed her to study female urology and general surgery in England and the United States. During her visits to the clinics in the US she noted:

I touched on everything. I saw the man who operated on Anthony Eden. I saw lots of hard, difficult work.

Returning to Australia, her reputation as 'a fine surgeon with sharp diagnostic skills' grew. Early in 1950 she operated on a tiny baby who suffered a cardiac arrest on the operating table. 'Opening the chest cavity, she gave the tiny heart a flick with her finger and the child's heart started beating'.

Renowned for her knowledge of female urological surgery, Lorna – now Dean of the Clinical School – also had the foresight to establish a Breast Clinic at the QVH in 1980. She received an OBE in the same year and, when she retired, looked forward to her fortnightly visits to the hospital to assist with operations. Lorna Sisley never married – but she more than fulfilled her dream of a medical career.



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MARGARET HARKNESS MCLORINAN

(1886-1932)



Margaret McLorinan was born in 1886 and educated at the Simpsons' School, which later became Mentone Girls' Grammar School. The year after Margaret's birth the University of Melbourne's Medical School started accepting female applicants and in 1890, Clara Stone and Helen Whyte were the first women to engage in medical training.

In 1901 at the young age of 15, Margaret McLorinan followed them and after graduation, she specialised in Obstetrics and Gynaecology.

Not much is known of her early career but it appears that 'Dr Peggy' as she was known, saw private patients in Melbourne and then worked at the Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital for Women and Children.

Dr Peggy worked at the Hospital for 21 years and in 1920, established an antenatal ward. President of the Honorary Medical staff and a member of the Committee of Management, she also facilitated the establishment of an Obstetrics department at the hospital. In 1928 Margaret McLorinan was the third woman to become a Fellow of the College (no. 231) but unfortunately, this advocate for women's health died just four years later.



Photo: Mentone Girls Grammar.

In 1934 at the opening of the 'Margaret McLorinan Operating Theatre,' the President of the Queen Victoria Hospital Committee, Mrs Norman Brookes gave a fitting panegyric to her:

She was a shining light in this hospital, in its administrative work and in the medical and operative work. Her sound common sense and unfailing bright outlook never failed us.

ESME VIVIENNE ANDERSON

(1896-1978)

Born at Ascot Vale in 1896, Esme Anderson was the only child of Leonard and Lavinia Anderson. After attending local schools, she was awarded a scholarship to the Presbyterian Ladies College and in 1913, obtained a university exhibition. She began an Arts degree at Melbourne University but switched to medicine in 1916, graduating with an MB BS in 1921.

Increasingly interested in Ophthalmology, in 1925 she completed two years postgraduate work in London (Royal London Ophthalmic Hospital) and obtained a Diploma in Ophthalmic Medicine and Surgery from the University of London.

She also did postgraduate work in Vienna and Prague and returning to Australia, she was appointed Ophthalmic Surgeon at the Eye and Ear Hospital. Her opposite number at the hospital was Jean Littlejohn (ENT) and like Jean, she was one of very few women in her field.



Photo: PLC Melbourne, Archives.

In 1934, Esme Anderson was the first FRACS in Ophthalmology, obtaining her Fellowship by examination. Not a great deal is known about Esme's life but in 1934, in addition to her work at the Eye and Ear Hospital, the Medical Directory of Australia lists her as an Honorary Ophthalmologist at the Queen Victoria Hospital.

In 1939 the Old Boys Column of the Melbourne

University student newspaper, Speculum, referred to her rather glibly as 'our most beautiful Oculist'. During World War 2, she was a Captain in the Australian Army Medical Corps. And in 1961, she wrote an article for the American Journal of Ophthalmology about Joseph Ringwood Anderson who established the first Orthoptic Clinic at the Alfred Hospital in 1930.

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QUEEN VICTORIA HOSPITAL



Originally located in a local church hall, the 'Queen Victoria Hospital for Women and Children' was founded in 1896 by eleven female doctors including the Stone sisters – Clara, Constance and Mary.

Following an appeal that coincided with Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897, the hospital opened in William Street, Melbourne. Staffed and managed by women, like the later Rachel Forster Hospital in Sydney, it was an institution well suited to the slogan, 'For Women, By Women'

In 1946, the Hospital moved to its Lonsdale Street site and encouraged significant women to join its ranks. These included the renowned English surgeon, Joyce Daws who joined the organisation in 1956. By the 1960s the patient profile began to



Queen Victoria Hospital, Photo: SLX.

change and Lorna Sisley operated on the first male patient at the hospital in 1963. The hospital was closed in 1987 and became part of the Monash Medical Centre in 1991. The remaining part of hospital building is currently home to the Queen Victoria Women's Centre Trust.

RACHEL FORSTER HOSPITAL

The 'New Hospital for Women and Children' was established in the Sydney suburb of Surry Hills in 1922. The hospital moved to Redfern in 1925 and was renamed after its patron, Rachel Forster, the wife of the Governor General. Located in inner city, the hospital catered for the needs of working class women and children. It also served as a training hospital for female medical students and doctors.

Twenty-three women were appointed as honorary doctors to the hospital in its first year. Two clinics a day were provided, including one for venereal diseases and an eye clinic. To assist working women, the hospital also had three evening clinics a week.

As time progressed, the hospital began to change – there were more specialised clinics and the first male patients were admitted in the 1960s. The Breast Cancer Research Centre led by surgeon, Dr Kathleen Cuninghame, was established in 1950 and in the same year, radiologist Marjorie Dalgarno, performed the first mammogram in Australia.

Threatened with closure in the 1990s, the hospital was amalgamated with the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in 2002. Its buildings are now derelict – an eyesore on the Redfern skyline.



Rachel Forster Hospital, Photo: Dictionary of Sydney.