

Medical Benevolent Association NSW – Reflections on 120 years

The Medical Benevolent Association NSW arose from the Cooper Defence Appeal, where the medical fraternity had come together, in 1895, to assist an esteemed colleague in his Appeal against a charge of 'unskilful action.' When the case was finalised, (sadly, lost on Appeal), a sum of money, £133 8s11d, was in surplus and at a meeting of the NSW Branch of the British Medical Association, Dr P. Sydney Jones (Chairman) announced that 'a meeting of the subscribers of the Cooper Defence Fund would be held at 121 Bathurst-street, (the Editor's Library of the Australasian Medical Gazette) on Friday, December 20th, for the purpose of converting the surplus into a benevolent fund'.

At this first meeting, a letter was read from Dr Cooper, stating 'he could not accept as a testimonial anything less than the whole balance of the fund.' As Dr Cooper's legal expenses in the Appeal case had been paid, it was determined that the 'balance be devoted to the formation of a benevolent Fund for the benefit of such members of the profession as may be deemed worthy of assistance.' (*A.M. Gazette January 20, 1896*)

At the Annual Meeting, held on Friday March 26th 1897, at the Royal Society's Room, with Dr Philip Sydney Jones as Chairman, the Executive was re-confirmed: Trustees - Dr P Sydney Jones & Dr R L Faithfull, Honorary Secretary Dr Morgan Martin, Committee - Dr F H Quaife & Dr Fiaschi. There were 49 subscribers and subscription was then opened to all members of the medical profession at 5s. per annum. It was proposed that the Cooper Defence Fund be renamed 'Medical Benevolent Fund of New South Wales' with the object 'to afford assistance to any duly qualified medical man, or widow, or orphan children of such, whom the committee deem worthy of assistance.' It was reported that 'one gentleman...had applied for assistance, and the necessary aid had been afforded to suit the case.' (*A.M. Gazette April 24, 1897*)

Meetings were to be held immediately following the meetings of the NSW Branch of the British Medical Association, a decision that ensured that the esteemed leaders of the medical fraternity remained fully engaged and connected with the benevolent activities.

During 1897, subscriptions flowed in to the Fund from both city and country practitioners, however, it was noted 'as applications to the fund are numerous and the fund small, further subscriptions are earnestly solicited.' Only about 1/6 of the medical men of the Colony were subscribers - this has remained a key challenge over the years. Currently membership of the Association is not required for a medical practitioner to receive support, however, still only a small percentage of practitioners contribute.

Formal reports of the Fund's activities were presented each year at the Annual Meeting and in 1898, we have the first details of benevolence bestowed and business transacted. At that time, Treasurer's balance sheets reported subscriptions during the previous 15 months totalling £21 17s 6d, which would have represented approximately 80 subscriptions, and fascinating detail, including an account for a piano (£15 10s) and its carriage (6s 10d).

Cases were reported in detail for the first few years:

'The first case that came before the committee was that of Dr Smith*, of Bankstown, to whom they had lent a piano for the use of his wife and daughter, who represented that by

means of it they might be able to earn sufficient to support him. Previously he had been granted the sum of 10s. a week, which was stopped about a month after he had received the piano. He now applied that the amount might be continued and the committee decided to allow him 7s 6d. per week for three months. On the 19th November, he having again applied for assistance, it was decided to allow him 10s a week as long as the funds would permit and to ask him to return the piano. But on a further request from Mrs Smith*, 2 months later, it was decided to still leave it in her hands in the hopes she might by means of it be able to augment their income. In all, in 1897 they had received £21 17s 6d.'

Next was Dr Jones*, to whom they gave a small sum (16s) 'to relieve his immediate wants'. Similarly £1 to the wife of Dr John Doe* and 5s to a Mr Johns*, whom they believed to be at the time 'in actual want of the barest necessities of life'. £10 was granted to Dr Burns*, who arrived in Sydney 'in a pitiable condition in the guise of a swagman'. The money was spent in 'supplying him with a new rig-out, and paying his fare to the country'. He subsequently returned to practice in Sydney. (*names have been changed)

From these early benevolent grants, we can see the beginnings of the guiding principles that remain today in the activities of the Medical Benevolent Association of NSW/ACT – ensuring the basic necessities of life, and providing a means to either return to the medical workforce, or to achieve financial independence through other means.

In 1899, it was reported that the Fund continued to grow, with subscriptions of £55 and a increasing membership, however, assistance granted during the year had grown to £48. The Committee were pleased that the money received was sufficient to meet the necessities of those claiming relief, and to leave a balance of some £125 in hand.

That year, relief was reported for 3 cases, all considered 'most deserving of aid'. Reports were made of the widow of a medical man, owing to the sudden death of her husband without means of any kind. 'She was enabled to stem the tide of her misfortunes', and expressed sincere gratitude with a promise of returning the amount advanced to her should her fortunes change.

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The case of an old 'gentleman, formerly practicing in Sydney, who in consequence of paralysis and business misfortunes, was obliged to apply for help, though bravely attempting to get professional work. A small amount was advanced to aid him in his struggle, but I am sorry to say that after he had been assisted as far as the Fund allowed, he has been obliged to succumb to an unequal struggle and accept assistance from the State.'

The Secretary, in urging all to subscribe to the Fund, noted: 'Misfortunes, for he has not himself to blame, may come to any man, and in these cases it seems right that we should be ready and willing to give a helping hand.'

At the annual meeting in 1900, with expenditure 'disbursed to various deserving cases' of £58 8s and subscriptions of £50 18s, it was resolved that the annual subscription be increased to 10s 6d (half a Guinea) per annum. The next year, at the turn of the Century, subscriptions (£62 7sh) kept just ahead of support again (£49 12s).

Under the leadership of the same committed group of esteemed medical colleagues of the day, the Benevolent Fund continued to grow, with subscribers being regularly published in the Australasian Medical Gazette. Alongside the Benevolent Fund, the British Medical Association (NSW) and the recently purchased Australasian Medical Gazette, the NSW Medical Union (the forerunner of the Medical Defence movement), also thrived and it should be noted that many of the same leading practitioners were involved in the management of all 4 entities.

120 years on, it is timely to reflect on the aspirations of our founding medical fraternity. At the turn of the century, the NSW Medical Benevolent Fund was firmly established within the medical community and review of the assistance given in the first 5 years (and beyond) confirms that the principles of benevolence commenced in 1896 have remained relevant today. The 1896 Objects still underpin the cornerstones of the Association - 'to afford assistance to any duly qualified medical man, or widow, or orphan children of such, whom the committee deem worthy of assistance.' These principles were clearly demonstrated in the late 1800's by:

- Purchasing a piano – to assist a family to build new ways of providing for themselves and to encourage independence of 'charity',
- Providing a new 'rig-out' for a colleague reduced to Swagman status – to assist a colleague to return to gainful employment and re-establish dignity
- Providing funds to ensure the necessities of life for families and/or widows when a medical practitioner dies or is affected by illness – time and time again
- Supporting practitioners who have fallen on hard times for any reason – 'business misfortunes', illness, advancing age.

As we move forward in to the next 120 years, we have faith that our current Medical Benevolent Association NSW will continue to embody the spirit of great benevolence & collegiate compassion demonstrated in the pioneering fathers of the late 1890's in Colonial NSW.

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MEDICAL BENEVOLENT
ASSOCIATION OF NSW