

Presentation for Wellington Medical Historical Society 4 March 2022.

1986 was a momentous year for women doctors in New Zealand. One hundred years earlier, the first woman registered as a doctor, though she had not qualified here. Her name was Eliza McDonogh Frikert.

In celebration of this, the Wellington Branch of the New Zealand Medical Women's Association did a presentation on the History of Women in Medicine at the Clinical School and out of this, the idea was formed to establish an Oral History Project, to honour and preserve the history of our senior members.

The Association comprised women doctors from all specialties and levels of seniority, including medical students, and it was felt that there was a rich history of experience in medicine that was worth preserving for future generations.

We researched stories already written about and by early women doctors in New Zealand, to get ideas for our aims and the project was funded entirely by donations from our members. We asked all our branches for suggestions for likely candidates – ideally to be New Zealand women who had graduated from Otago University - and we obtained an initial list of 8 women. We then engaged a well-known broadcaster from RNZ, Neville Glasgow, to explain to us what was involved in conducting, recording and storing the interviews, and subsequently we appointed him to undertake the interviews.

In later years, more interviews were done, seven by Dr Tree Cocks in Dunedin, two by an old friend of mine, Mrs Elaine Barron, in Gisborne, another one by Dr Ruth Black in Auckland and finally, more recently, four were done by Rose O'Connor in Wellington, making a grand total of twenty-two oral histories in the collection.

Recordings need to be done in a certain way, with abstracts made for ease of finding information afterwards. Consent was provided by the interviewees regarding future access to their recordings.

Some placed no time limit for access. Others specified that access should only be permitted after their death, or after permission was sought either from a family member, or from our Association.

We in the Association never listened to these tapes. As they were completed, they were placed in the care of the Oral History Archive at the Alexander Turnbull Library, which is part of Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa, the National Library in Molesworth St.

Our Association went into recess in 2004 and our project lay dormant until 2010. A lunch for past members had been arranged to celebrate our old Association, and at that lunch Dr Kathy Stone, who had been Treasurer of our Wellington Branch, informed us that she had been looking after a sum of Branch money which she had serendipitously kept aside after the closure of our National Association. It was decided that there was enough money to fund 4 more interviews of previous members. We appointed Rose O'Connor to conduct the interviews and she completed this task in 2018, finishing with my history.

We then officially handed over the responsibility for the project to the Alexander Turnbull Library, as up until this time I was the one who – on behalf of our Association- was being approached from time to time about access to the histories.

In preparation for this presentation, I approached the Library about listening to some tapes and discovered that the Library is now keen to promote easier access to them. Having listened to 8 tapes in our collection, I can understand their reasons. These histories provide a fascinating glimpse into the past.

I listened to 7 of Neville Glasgow's interviews and the one done by Ruth Black for Margaret Neave. With great difficulty, Kathy and I have honed it down to excerpts from four of these histories, to give you an idea of medical eras long gone. Of interest, I think that some of you will know at least two of the doctors.

The first history is that of **Dr Eily Elaine Gurr**. It was conducted on 27 May 1987 when she was 90 years old. **Photo**

Elaine- as she was better known- was born in Roseneath on 8th November 1896 and she recounted how she had learned to ride and care for her horses from the age of 2 years. It was a skill which proved to be very useful in her career later. By the way, as she states in her interview, at that time her family owned Roseneath!

Her parents were very supportive of her decision to do medicine. She went to St Margaret's College in 1917 and graduated in 1922, along with Muriel Bell and Charles Burns, both also to become celebrated in their careers later on.

She was appointed House Surgeon at Timaru Hospital, then left afterwards to undertake post graduate training in Dublin -at the Coombes and Rotunda Hospitals -and London, where she was instructed in gynaecology by Lady Barratt and Miss Darnley, before returning to New Zealand.

At his request, she worked for Sir Apirana Ngata for two years, establishing ante natal clinics in every St Helen's Hospital throughout the country. This was in response to a report in May 1922 which showed that the rate of maternal mortality in the country was very high. A Committee of the Board of Health was set up and made numerous recommendations on how this situation might be improved. I came across a report on this in a recent edition of the NZMJ under the item "100 years ago in the NZMJ"

Following this, in 1929, Elaine went up to the East Cape, working as Medical Superintendent at Matakaoa Hospital in Te Araroa for 18 months. Horses were the common mode of transport there, as there were no roads. Riverbeds were used to travel throughout the country. Six horses were stabled at the hospital along with a coach, for her use. She visited Maori Pas frequently, especially to provide care to those with TB and asthma, and encouraged them to get vaccinated against TB and meningococcal disease.

However the isolation from medical education and colleagues finally made her move to Auckland, where she worked for 40 years in her Symonds St rooms. Her education continued with a trip to the Karolinska Institute in Sweden to learn more about Endocrinology.

Elaine endowed two Chairs; the Chair of General Practice to the Otago Medical School and the Chair of Community Medicine to the Auckland Medical School because she felt that general practitioners were "guardians of the family in New Zealand."

As you might imagine, she was active in her retirement with a wide range of interests, involving St John's Ambulance – where she worked as a lecturer and examiner during WW2 and donated towards their equipment- , SPCA – where she established a hospital for animals near the airport-and The Salvation Army- she set up a hospital for destitute people in conjunction with St John's

Ambulance. Elaine never married. I am going to play two short clips from her long career to give you an idea of her approach to her work.

Listen

Ernest Kemp, by the way, administered the anaesthetics!
She was expected to treat the results of accidents on the station such as fractures and gunshot wounds and she also provided care to the shearers who lived there permanently.

Some other quotes:

She loved the Balls that were held at Knox and Selwyn Colleges and the parties. Afternoon teas in the student rooms were lovely and very correct.!

Elaine felt very encouraged by her professors and she was not aware of encountering any difficulties from male colleagues or male patients during her career.

Sir Apirana Ngata was very friendly, he used to hold meetings with her while he was shaving!

“I abhor the fragmentation of medicine”

“ Doing night calls in Auckland during the War years was dangerous as there were no street lights”

“We lose a great deal by not going into the homes of patients”

Died aged 100 years in December 1996.

The second history is that of **Dr Mollie Christie**. Her interview took place on 4 December 1988 when she was 87 years old. **Photo**

She was born in Wanganui in April 1901 . She went down to Otago in 1919 and qualified MBChB from there in 1923-at 22 years old. (I wonder if her choice of career might have been influenced by the fact that her maternal great grandfather was John Dorset, surgeon, who accompanied Wakefield on the Tory and subsequently became surgeon to the New Zealand Company.)

Her first job was in Kumara ,where she was employed by the Westland Hospital Board to take charge of a retirement home and was GP to the whole area. She boarded initially in one of the many pubs in Kumara, and the pub owner- a woman- used to stay up at night when Mollie was called out on a visit, to make sure that she got back safely.

Listen.

Mollie then married Harry Kenrick Christie, a surgeon, and moved to Wanganui during the early days of the Depression in 1926 , where she reared 5 children, ran a general practice with her husband and was also honorary physician at Wanganui Hospital as well as an anaesthetist and obstetrician.

Photo : MBE 1971. She was awarded this for services to medicine in Wanganui.

Mollie died in July 1997 at the age of 96 years.

The third history is that of **Dr Denny Gillies**. It was done in August and October 1986 when she was 84 years old. **Photo**

Denny was born on 18th July 1902 in Dunedin. She qualified from Otago in 1927

She went to work in Palmerston North as a House Surgeon 1928-1931 and we are going to hear excerpts of her experience there, because she was involved with the Napier Earthquake victims.

Listen

Life as a house surgeon there was not always that bad and Denys recounted relaxing by playing golf and playing her piano.

Subsequently she went to England to do post graduate training in radiology before returning to Palmerston North where she worked as a consultant, then moved to Wellington where she took rooms in Kelvin Chambers.

Denny spoke at length too about her late sister Dr Rita Gillies ,who died at an early age of cardiac complications from scarlet fever and diphtheria- the latter caught when she was doing an emergency tracheostomy on a patient while in general practice in Tuatapere. Denny set up the Rita Gillies Gardner Memorial

Fund for the student who gained the highest aggregate marks in their Final Professional exams- they got a suitably inscribed book. I note that there is still a Rita Gardner travelling Scholarship available for 6th year medical students. Denny died in 1989.

Our final history is that of **Dr Elsie Gibbons**. Her interviews were done in April 1993 when she was 77 years old. Many of us will remember Elsie, I certainly do. She was a delightful character.

Photo

Elsie was born in 1916 and qualified in 1941. She then worked at Wellington Hospital as a House Surgeon. One of her consultants was Sir Charles Burns with whom she got on very well! He was apparently noted for being difficult but she managed him.

She then went overseas for post graduate training. On her return to Wellington, Elsie gradually specialised in Community Paediatrics working at Karitane, Home of Compassion and Kimi Ora. She wanted to provide good care to children in the community so that they might avoid spending long periods of time in hospital, which she felt was detrimental to their overall state of health.

Elsie did not recall any obstacles to her as a woman working in medicine and felt strongly that she was well able to do her job. All of us who knew her would agree I am sure! By the way, in all of the 8 interviews I listened to, none of the women admitted to encountering any difficulty with male colleagues or male patients either.

The snippet we will hear is her approach, while working as a house surgeon, at Wellington Hospital, to the treatment of the women who ended up in hospital with sepsis following illegal abortions.

Listen

Elsie died in 2009, aged 93 years.

Final Photo- Women Medical Students circa 1926- identify several women.

Plans for the future:

The Turnbull Endowment Trust – which funds the Alexander Turnbull Library- is planning to make 6 podcasts of 15 minutes duration, using the histories that our Association provided. The podcasts would be hosted by Radio New

Zealand. The Library is also exploring ways to provide distant access to the histories. You are welcome to go into the Library yourselves and listen, after contacting the Curator Linda Evans for permission to do so.

The Alexander Turnbull Library has provided me with information on the services they offer in relation to Oral History. I will arrange to have this posted on the WMHS website which you can access, should you be interested in recording your own Oral History or indeed that of someone else.

In summary, we former members of the NZ Medical Women's Association are delighted that our Oral History Project has proved to be such a wonderful legacy and that we have been able to honour the memory of some of the amazing women doctors who so ably led the way for us to follow.

Thank you.