

CHAPTER 1

THE EARLY YEARS IN AUSTRALIA

Rehabilitation Post World War II

Wartime is always a source of medical progress. In 1946 Douglas Galbraith, a Chief Medical Officer in the Australian Military Forces was appointed Co-ordinator of Rehabilitation for the Ministry of Post-War Reconstruction. In the same year George Burniston¹, who was in charge of the RAAF Medical Rehabilitation Unit at Jervis Bay following his return to Australia from service with the Royal Air Force (RAF), was seconded to the Ministry. In 1948 this Ministry became the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service and George Burniston and Dudley Longmuir were appointed Senior Medical Officers to provide the medical expertise at the administrative level.

Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service

At the end of World War II rehabilitation was all about injured service people. At the time the Commonwealth would help to rehabilitate people while they were still in the services but once they were discharged the rehabilitation stopped and they became the recipients of disability or permanent invalid pensions. Recognising the expense involved in supporting the long term beneficiaries of invalid pension and those receiving unemployment and sickness benefits, the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service, administered by the Department of Social Services was established. It was set up at a time when the public hospital system had very little interest in the rehabilitation of injured people with disabilities. There were federally funded rehabilitation facilities in most states for injured service people. The charter gradually changed to include people with disabilities who were perceived to have had vocational potential within two years. The rehabilitation service provided was about getting people back to work and off the pension, rather than the patient's independence or personal care or activities of daily living.

Initially the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service was an institutional-based medically directed model, but gradually the allied health professionals were given greater responsibility and became team leaders. When administrators were given the authority to make prescriptions for treatment, the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service as a medically directed model began to disintegrate.

Other Developments in Rehabilitation

There were other strands to the development of rehabilitation at this time, some being the charitable organisations mainly dealing with children with Polio and Cerebral Palsy. A few of the pioneers of rehabilitation in Australia, including George Burniston, began to realise that teams of multi-skilled medical personnel led by medically trained doctors were needed to co-ordinate local rehabilitation services within the public health system.

In the late 1940's the government also set up a Commonwealth Committee on Rehabilitation that was presided over by the head of the Department of Social Services. Members included Selwyn Nelson, Albert Monk, then President of the ACTU, Sir Kenneth Coles, Chairman of the NSW Society for Crippled Children, Miss

¹ See biography at the end of this publication

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Tuscan and representatives of lay organisations caring for the long term disabled. The object was to develop a professional and community awareness of the advantages of the application of rehabilitation techniques to persons with long-term disabilities. Community involvement at that stage included the development in various States of centres such as the Spastic Centre in Sydney, Bedford Industries in South Australia, and special centres for the care of spinal injuries with such pioneers as George Bedbrook in Western Australia.

The Pan Pacific Congress on Rehabilitation held in Sydney in the early 1950's gave a great impetus to the status of rehabilitation in Australia. Selwyn Nelson was chairman of the planning committee and the opportunity was taken to invite a number of distinguished overseas experts: Howard Rusk and Henry Kessler from USA, Kit Wynn Parry from UK and Margarie Warren, a geriatrician from U.K. The financial viability was assured by the sponsorship by the NSW Society for Crippled Children. There was a large attendance from overseas including medical, paramedical and social workers as well as patients.

Another milestone was in 1972 when the 12th World Congress of Rehabilitation was held in Sydney, convened by George Burniston. It also coincided with the meeting of the Australian Council for Rehabilitation of the Disabled.