

Dagmar Berne's Story

The difficult road of the first female medical student.

by Vanessa Witton



In 2008, The Faculty of Medicine has more female students than male. But women didn't have an easy time in the early days of the Faculty of Medicine. Dagmar Berne, the first woman to enrol in medicine at the University of Sydney in 1885, battled deeply entrenched attitudes and was forced to complete her studies in the United Kingdom.

Dr Vanessa Witton works with the Faculty of Medicine on history projects and publications. A relative of Dagmar Berne, she has written her doctoral thesis and a historical novel based on Dagmar's life.

DAGMAR BERNE WAS born in the New South Wales coastal town of Bega on 16 November 1866, the daughter of a Danish-born auctioneer and land owner, Frederick Berne. Her mother, Georgina Witton (who was my great great great great aunt) was born in Hobart.

Dagmar's father died during the Bega flood of 1875 and her mother Georgina remarried shortly after. The family moved in 1876 to *The Lancefield Estate* at St Peters in Sydney.

For several years Dagmar and the younger Berne children attended Newtown Superior Public School. In 1882, the teenage Dagmar boarded at the exclusive *Springfield Ladies' College* in Darlinghurst. The girls were taught French and other 'accomplishments' considered suitable to the education of young ladies in the late nineteenth century. Visiting gentlemen lecturers taught Latin and Mathematics. Chemistry, Physics and Greek were offered to boys at neighbouring schools but were not taught at girls' schools at the time. Dagmar was unhappy during the one term she spent at *Springfield*, and believed that the fees that her mother was paying were too high for the amount of useful learning she was receiving.

The University of Sydney had just opened its doors to women students, and she requested private tuition in chemistry to assist her to pass the *Senior Public Examination* to gain Matriculation to the Faculty of Arts. Dagmar entered the University in 1884. She successfully completed her first year studying Latin, French, Euclid, Algebra, Trigonometry, Arithmetic, Chemistry, Physics and English.

Although no diaries or letters penned by Dagmar remain, we know from her sister and contemporaries that she was intelligent and deeply dedicated to her studies, and someone who was shy, kind, and disliked shallowness and bigotry. She was also ambitious and determined to

take advantage of the opportunities which were becoming increasingly available to women.

By 1885, women students were allowed to study medicine at the University, provided they had completed the first year of Arts. Dagmar was the first and only woman to enrol in the third intake of fifteen medical students in 1885.

The Dean of Medicine, (Sir) Professor Thomas Peter Anderson Stuart and the Vice Chancellor, (Sir) Henry Normand MacLaurin, claimed not to be in favour of women entering the Faculty. On many occasions Anderson Stuart publicly voiced his opposition to women in medicine and his belief that they were unsuited to its study. "... the proper place for women is the home, and the proper function for a woman is to be a man's wife, and for woman to be the mothers of our future generations...within certain limits they have played a useful part in medical life; but there are limits..."

MacLaurin claimed that no woman would graduate in medicine while he was Vice-Chancellor.

In spite of this, women medical students boldly began enrolling in medicine. Three years later, in 1888, Dagmar was joined by Iza Coghlan, with Harriet Biffin and Grace Robinson entering the following year.

Dagmar failed the First Professional Examinations in 1885, repeated the year and then passed in 1886. She failed in the Second Professional Examinations of 1888 and was still studying Medicine IV in 1889. She passed the first two sections of her Second Professional Examinations in the same year, but failed in Pathology and Materia Medica. She was allowed to take deferred examinations in these subjects in March 1890, but she was failed in these also.

In April 1885, Dagmar had met the pioneer British woman physician Elizabeth Garrett Anderson during her



lecture tour on education for women and girls at the *Sydney School of Arts*. The two are believed to have discussed the possibility of Dagmar completing her studies at *The London School of Medicine for Women*. Having inherited an independent income, after her final failure in 1890 Dagmar sailed to London to complete her medical studies.

Dagmar was taught by Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and (Dame) Mary Scharlieb as well as by physicians from the neighbouring *Royal Free Hospital* in Gray's Inn Road, where the women medical students undertook clinical training. Dagmar also worked at Garrett Anderson's all women's hospital *The New Hospital for Women* in Euston Road.

Dagmar lived in damp accommodation in London and suffered from frequent bouts of pneumonia and pleurisy. Despite health problems Dagmar gained her Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries (LSA), and the Scottish Triple: The Licentiate of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh (LRCS), the Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh (LRCP), and the Licentiate of the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow (LFPS) in 1893.

During 1893, she was appointed Clinical Assistant at the North Eastern Fever Hospital in South Tottenham. In 1894, she travelled to Ireland for postgraduate study in midwifery at The Rotunda Hospital Dublin before returning to Sydney in December. She registered with the Medical Board of NSW on 9 January, 1895, the second woman in NSW to do so after (Emma) Constance Stone.

As a medical practitioner, Dagmar was never permitted to work in public hospitals in Sydney alongside male doctors and practised privately in Macquarie Street between 1896-8. She was devoted to the cause of underprivileged girls in Sydney, offering her services to *The Working and Factory Girls Club*, lecturing about food

and hygiene. Dagmar also worked with impoverished girls and women in the lower dock area of Woollloomooloo for little or no fees.

By 1898, her health was failing and she was diagnosed with advanced tuberculosis. She moved to Springwood in the Blue Mountains, which was renowned for its health-giving properties. But by January 1900, her health had worsened and she moved to the drier and warmer western township of Trundle in NSW.

The services of a doctor in the town were required and for a time, she practised from *Yarrabundie Station* and also from professional rooms at the southern end of the Trundle Hotel. She was especially concerned with the well-being of women after childbirth, insisting they receive adequate rest away from the demands of their household: in this, she was ahead of her time. Dagmar ministered to people of all denominations, often offering her services for little or no charge. Even on the night of her death she treated a man who had injured himself at the Trundle Hotel, herself so frail that "she could hardly shake a bottle of medicine."

Dagmar haemorrhaged and died of pulmonary phthisis and exhaustion on a bitter winter night on August 22, 1900, aged 34. She is buried at Waverley Cemetery in Sydney.

Dagmar Berne has become something of an icon in the Faculty. Were she still alive, I think she would be astounded that she has been mythologised in this way, that she is viewed as the pioneer who paved the way for generations of women medical students in Sydney to follow. *radius*

A longer biography of Dagmar Berne will appear in the Faculty of Medicine Online Museum. For footnotes or enquiries regarding this research, please contact Dr Vanessa Witton on 9036 3115 or email vwitton@med.usyd.edu.au.

Left to right: The author at Dagmar Berne's grave in Waverley Cemetery.

Royal Prince Alfred medical class 1887, Dagmar in the centre.

Dagmar Berne 1890s