The Forgotten Dr Ellen Wood

The difficulties of women entering medicine in the late nineteenth century – in Australia generally and at the University of Sydney in particular - have received some attention. It has been said that the University deliberately opposed the original entry of women into medicine and that Professor Anderson Stuart did not believe their proper place was in a medical school. Some have gone so far as to suggest that women were failed more frequently than the male students. Those women who managed to ‘get through’, faced a further hurdle in NSW where the medical profession sought to debar women from public appointment.

While there has been a focus on Dagmar Berne, the first woman to enrol in medicine in the University of Sydney, hers is not a unique experience. Louise Baur & Roderick Best believe that the story of Ellen Maud Wood, another medical student of the late 1800s, deserves re-telling...

Ellen Maud Wood was the daughter of Joseph Holden Wood of Neutral Bay, an executive with International Harvester Co and his wife Jane. She attended Sydney Girls High School before enrolling in Sydney Medical School in 1891. She failed first year and repeated it in 1892. She entered and completed second year in 1893 and then enrolled in third year in 1894 which again she failed and repeated in 1895. She did not complete her degree.

At this point, her career looks remarkably similar to that of Dagmar Berne who also failed to complete her degree and departed for the UK where she obtained an LSA (London) in 1893 together with Diplomas from the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons, Edinburgh, the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons, Glasgow and the Society of Apothecaries, London. (Berne probably realised the necessity of travelling overseas to finish her studies after being advised by the then Chancellor of Sydney University, Sir Normand MacLaurin, that he would not allow any woman to graduate in medicine.)

Like Ms Berne, after departing Sydney Medical School without a degree, Ellen Wood proceeded to the UK where she obtained an MLRCP et LRGS from Edinburgh and a LFPS from Glasgow, both in 1897.

Dr Wood worked firstly at the Royal Free Hospital, London and then Coombe Lying In Hospital, Dublin before returning to take up an appointment in Adelaide in July 1898. At the time no woman was allowed to be appointed to a residency position in NSW. Hers was a joint appointment following the departure of Dr Kinmont. Adelaide Hospital paid Dr Kinmont £250 per annum but when it jointly appointed both Drs Wood and Harriett Eliza Biffin to the same single position, it paid each of them £100 per annum.

At the conclusion of their 12 month appointment in Adelaide, Drs Wood and Biffin returned to Sydney where they established a medical practice in 197 Elizabeth Street. This practice did not succeed and in 1904, Dr Biffin, with no family money supporting her, established a practice in Lindfield which she successfully conducted for many years.

When their city practice folded, Dr Wood was a little more fortunate. She had already been appointed in 1903 as a medical officer for the Balmain United Friendly Society Dispensing Board. In 1904, in spite of threats from the British Medical Association (forerunner of the Australian Medical Association) to ostracise her if she was appointed as medical officer to Balmain Hospital, she gained the position. She remained there until 1909 when she established a practice in the then semi-rural Sydney dormitory suburb of Beecroft, arriving with ‘four horses and an up-to-date groom’.

Again, there appear to have been difficulties in gaining acceptance and patients because she left Beecroft in May 1910, with the Cumberland Argus saying that she “has shaken the Beecroft dust from her shoes.” This time she did find a Dr Elsworthy to take over her practice – but he only stayed for two months.

Her experiences in trying to establish medical practices in Sydney were now put behind her as she attempted to establish her career in country locations. After leaving Beecroft, she moved to Queensland, building her own private hospital in 1910 in Cooroy. 

Dr Ellen Wood
In October of 1910, The Chronicle and North Coast Advertiser reported:

We are informed by Dr Ellen Wood that her private hospital at Cooroy is now completed and quite ready for the reception of patients. Dr Wood also mentions that Mrs Bain-Smith has charge of the obstetric wards. Our representative reports that on his last visit to that conspicuously rising town, the premises were well on towards completion, and gave every promise that their comfort and convenience would be unsurpassed in the district, the building being specially planned by Dr Wood herself for the purposes for which it is now open.

She remained there until 1914 when she accepted appointment as government medical officer in Murgon, and in 1915 she had a position in Nanango. At some stage she re-located to Bungendore in NSW, leaving there in 1926.

She was the South Australian delegate to the British Commonwealth League's seventh annual conference in London in 1931 before being appointed as medical officer at Canungra District Hospital, Queensland in October 1934, where she died the following year of pneumonia after her peripatetic medical career.

Like so many of her contemporary female colleagues (such as Dagmar Berne, Harriett Biffin, Iza Coghlan and Lucy Gullett), she never married.

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Above: Cooroy Private Hospital c1920. Photograph supplied by Cooroy-Noosa Genealogical & Historical Research Group Inc.