

Our marvellous

It is 125 years since women were first admitted to study medicine at Melbourne University. Last week those who followed in their footsteps celebrated their achievements.

ROBYN RILEY reports

THEY were young women with a shared passion for studying medicine.

Standing in the way of these pioneers — from backgrounds as diverse as a politician's daughter to a teacher's middle child — were the prejudices of 19th-century Melbourne.

Some in the community raged that the very idea of women becoming doctors was "unwomanly", whereas others declared it would "unsex" them.

And though women had been allowed to sit the matriculation exam in Victoria for more than 10 years by then, they had only recently been allowed to actually matriculate.

But feisty friends Lilian Alexander and the gruff-voiced Helen Sexton with the keen sense of humour were determined to study medicine at the University of Melbourne.

They eventually succeeded, and in doing so these academically gifted and courageous young Victorians helped paved the way for future generations.

Last week eight of our top medical researchers and academics with connections to that same university came together to honour not only the 125th anniversary, but also to inspire new and emerging researchers.

The women helped to host a forum looking at ways women can work to advance their careers in medical research. Speakers included Nobel Laureate Prof Elizabeth Blackburn — the first Australian woman to win the Nobel Prize for medicine — Prof Ingrid Scheffer, a world expert on epilepsy, and Prof Ruth

Helen Sexton

The first woman appointed to the honorary staff of the Women's Hospital and the force behind the push for the university to admit women to medicine. Worked in Melbourne as a much-loved gynaecologist, medical practitioner and obstetrician.

Lilian Helen Alexander

Would become a respected surgeon who lived in the same South Yarra street her whole life. Helped organise the campaign for women to study at Melbourne University. Her uncle was a surgeon-general in India.

Elizabeth O'Hara

With her sister Annie, was one of the famous seven who was among the first group of women to study medicine at Melbourne University. Also worked at the Queen Victoria after graduating.

Annie O'Hara

Sister of Elizabeth, their father, P. K. O'Hara, was a prominent schoolmaster in Melbourne who had asked Melbourne University to allow his daughters to study medicine there. Worked at the Queen Victoria Hospital.

Grace Clara Stone

Known as Clara, she was one of the first two women to graduate in medicine in Melbourne. Went into private practice with her sister, Constance and helped establish the Queen Victoria Hospital in 1899.

Margaret Whyte

One of the first females to graduate with a medical degree in Australia. The daughter of a prominent Victorian schoolmaster, she qualified for a residency at the Melbourne Hospital, but agreed to transfer to the Women's Hospital.

Grace Vale

The daughter of William Mountford Kinsey Vale, an MLA in Ballarat and Melbourne and a former attorney-general. Grace practised medicine in Ballarat from 1896-1915.

Bishop, an expert in child health.

Also there to share their career experiences were Prof Philippa Pattison, Prof Elizabeth Hartland, Prof Leann Tilley, Prof Jane Gunn and Prof Emeritus Judith Whitworth.

It would have made the Magnificent Seven — as they were dubbed by historians — proud.

In 1887 Lilian was 26. The daughter of a printer and bookseller, Thomas Alexander, and his Irish wife, Jane, she had already completed an arts degree at Melbourne University — one of the first women to do so.

Lilian, who would live her entire life in Murphy St,

“Some in the community raged that the very idea of women becoming doctors was ‘unwomanly’, whereas others declared it would ‘unsex’ them

South Yarra, would go on to enjoy a remarkable career as a surgeon in Victoria.

Helen Sexton was one of her close friends, then aged 25.

They had met at Melbourne University when both successfully applied to do an arts degree.

The daughter of builder and architect Daniel and his wife, Maria, Helen had been educated at Carlton

Ladies' College and briefly considered going to London to study medicine. Helen was noted for her considerable surgical skills, but ill health would eventually force her to retire early and in 1912 the respected doctor went to live in Europe.

When World War I broke out she was aged in her 50s, but still served as a doctor in the French army. Helen came back to Australia

briefly after the war, but made her home in Florence.

It was thanks to the efforts of these determined women that Melbourne University finally agreed in 1887 to accept seven women — all aged in their 20s — into its medical course.

Joining Lilian and Helen were Melbourne sisters Annie and Elizabeth O'Hara, Margaret Whyte, Ballarat girl Grace Vale, and Clara Stone from East Melbourne.

Clara's sister, Constance, had asked to study medicine at the university in 1883, but was refused.

So she went to America where she obtained her medical degree at the same university where Dr Eliza-

beth Blackwell a few years earlier had become the first woman in the world to graduate in medicine.

With their cousin, Mary Stone, the three women went into practice together in Melbourne.

They would earn about 1000 pounds a year each — 10 times more than a school-teacher — but that was all ahead; for the time being the battle had only just begun.

In 1887 Melbourne University may have agreed to the women's request, but hospitals would prove a more difficult stumbling block. Most refused to appoint women to medical positions and the Melbourne Hospital committee





FRANCES WHITING

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medical women

Professor Philippa Pattison

The maths lover studied at Melbourne University where she is now deputy vice-chancellor (Academic). Prof Pattison has said she wants to see women coming to maths and science in greater numbers.

Professor Ingrid Scheffer

A world expert on epilepsy. "I went into medicine to make a difference. By doing medical research, I can help far more people around the world than just the patients I see."

Professor Elizabeth Blackburn AC

The Nobel Prize winner graduated from Melbourne University, as did her mother, Marcia, who was also a doctor. She is also known for her commitment to encouraging women to pursue scientific careers.

Professor Elizabeth Hartland

Studied at the University of Melbourne and now heads a research group there. The mother of two said in an interview she was keenly aware of the pressures that female scientists faced in order to remain competitive after parental leave.

Professor Leann Tilley

A scientist/researcher, she said: "I want my work to make a difference. Discovering a new antimalarial drug could potentially save millions of lives. What a life's work that would be!"

Professor Jane Gunn

Head, Department of General Practice, University of Melbourne. She said she was inspired to do medicine by the country doctors in her home town of Sale, Dr Joe Crosbie and Dr Phillip Mein.

Professor Emeritus Judith Whitworth AC

She was inspired to study medicine when she was a small child during an extended stay in hospital. "I spent a lot of time in hospital because I had polio in one of the last great epidemics before the vaccine was discovered, and it was this that brought me to medicine."

Professor Ruth Bishop

Discovered rotavirus and developed the vaccine. The Melbourne scientist has devoted her career to improving children's health.



Picture: PETER CASAMENTO

didn't help by declaring the task of women working as doctors in hospitals was "too strenuous and trying". And there was still much debate that year over the suitable subject matter of lectures for women.

In *Degrees of Liberation: A Short History of Women in the University of Melbourne*, Farley Kelly writes: "It was not an easy year for the little group of new students, who were much in the public eye as the merits of separate lectures, dissection and hospital practice were debated by the council, the Melbourne press and the medical faculty."

Despite all of this, at the end of 1891 Grace Stone and

Margaret Whyte became the first females to graduate. They topped the honours list in medicine and surgery and became the first female medical graduates registered in Australia.

It was still difficult for the women to get jobs in hospitals — so once again they found their own solution.

The magnificent seven — under the guidance of Constance Stone — helped set up their own hospital, a hospital run by women for women and even paid for by women through a statewide shilling fund to mark Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee.

Eventually called the Queen Victoria Hospital, it gave all seven graduates the

chance to hone their medical skills at the first hospital in Australia to be staffed entirely by female doctors.

It was the idea of Constance Stone. Now married to Dr David Egryn Jones and the mother of Bronwen — who would also become a doctor in England — Constance had worked at the New Hospital for Women in London and was inspired to create something similar in Melbourne.

Constance and Clara were the daughters of builder William Stone and his wife, Betsy.

Constance persuaded her father to allow her to study medicine in America, Canada and Britain before

she returned to Melbourne in 1890 as the first female doctor to register with the Medical Board of Victoria.

She died of tuberculosis two years after the Queen Victoria Hospital opened, but her sister Clara — who lived in St Kilda until her death at the age of 97 — continued to practise there for many years.

Cousin Mary Stone also continued to work at the hospital and was very involved with the National Council of Women.

Of the other graduates Grace Vale — the daughter of MLA William Mountford Kinsey Vale — returned to Ballarat where she worked as a general practitioner

from 1896-1915. Margaret Whyte qualified for a residency at the Melbourne Hospital — but to keep the peace, she took a post at the hospital for women instead and soon married Dr Horatio Martell and had a daughter, Helen.

Elizabeth and Annie O'Hara, the daughters of P.K. O'Hara, a prominent headmaster, graduated together.

The close sisters also practised in the suburbs around Melbourne for a number of years and were also proudly involved in the Queen Victoria Hospital with the rest of the Magnificent Seven.

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FAST FACTS

1886

VICTORIAN Dr Constance Stone became the first woman registered as a medical practitioner in Australia.

1887

SEVEN women are the first to start a medical degree at Melbourne University.

1896

THERE are now 10 female doctors practising in Melbourne

1899

THE Queen Victoria Hospital opens, supported by the women of Victoria and run by women.

2012

THIS year more women (171) than men (153) start a medical degree at Melbourne University.

2012

IN December 148 women and 167 men will graduate from the university with a Bachelor of Medicine/Bachelor of Surgery

2012

THERE are more than 8000 women registered as general practitioners in Victoria