Physiotherapy in Australia has an exceptional reputation by world standards. We are proud that the Royal Prince Alfred hospital (RPA) Physiotherapy Department has always been at the forefront of the profession, leading with the development of physiotherapy treatments. But just how early did it all begin?

In 1889 lectures and exams on the subject of 'the massage battery' were given to trainee third year nurses, who carried out practical work in massage and electricity in the RPA wards and outpatients department until 1906. These practices reflected the overseas work of Swedish practitioner Per Henrik Ling, who in 1813 had founded his Gymnastic Central Institute at Stockholm and pioneered a series of gymnastic movements to help relieve chronic pain. By 1892, training classes in Ling movements and use of the battery had also been introduced across the United Kingdom and were spreading further.

RPA chairman Professor Thomas Peter Anderson Stuart, whose finger was always on the pulse, had kept abreast of these developments during his overseas travels. On his return to Sydney in 1902, he spoke at an RPA board meeting about physical culture for children and electrical treatment in massage. He explained that Australia was being left behind in many areas, with departments of medical gymnastics already well evolved in hospitals in America and Europe, and completely undeveloped here. Anderson Stuart’s interest in physical deformities and his considerable influence led to the hospital taking steps to introduce a gymnastic department.

The hospital directors looked to a Sydney exponent on medical gymnastics, physician Dr Reuter Roth, who advertised his practice and teaching of medical gymnastics and massage in the Australasian Medical Gazette in the 1890s. They agreed that a memorandum based on his advice be submitted to the board, which led to Roth planning the department of medical gymnastics at RPA, connected to the outpatients department. It was the first department of medical gymnastics to be established in Australia. A masseur was appointed in 1902 and a masseur service introduced.

In 1906 it was known as the ‘Department of Massage, Medical Gymnastics and Electricity.’ Roth was the only candidate for the role of director and on 14 May 1906 was appointed honorary medical officer. RPA hospital historian Muriel Knox Doherty noted: “Under his dynamic leadership the innovation made rapid strides and achieved excellent results.”

The Medical Gymnastics Department Staff. Dr Reuter Roth (centre) - RPA Annual Report 1913.
Qualified and experienced massage therapists were employed. Three honorary massuers and ten honorary masseuses were appointed to positions of part-time work for one year, attending twice a week. The first appointees were Misses (Lily) Lizzie Edith Armstrong, Cope, Douglas, Campbell, Hare, Lilley, Kabat, Rossiter, Milne and Walker, and Messrs Maler, Job and Preston.

These practitioners were differentiated by their dress: men wore long white coats, and women wore ankle-length washing dresses with long sleeves and Peter Pan collars, white aprons and buckled belt, black shoes and stockings. In this first year Miss F Douglas provided leadership, supported by Miss S Lilley.

In 1906, stiff joints, curvature of the spine, fractures, and muscle wasting following traumatism disease were some of the conditions treated. Each afternoon up to 41 outpatients attended. One room in the basement of the Albert Pavilion was the department’s original site, however it rapidly increased in size and had to move some of its activities into what was then known as ‘Mrs (Harriet) Curry’s Sewing Room.’

By 29 October 1906 Prince Alfred Hospital Gazette described the medical gymastics branch as: “interesting and picturesque”, with “various queer-looking appliances, designed by Dr Roth for the treatment of weak or twisted backs, legs, arms etc., and upon which patients pass through a sort of physical culture course.” Roth was reported as introducing for the first time in Australasia the Swedish treatment method of medical gymnastics but on a much larger scale.

Some idea of its increasing popularity and status can be seen during this year, as the first massage association in Australasia was formed in New South Wales, with Anderson Stuart serving as president and Lizzie Armstrong first honorary secretary. Hospital historian Doherty noted that the new association undertook a great deal of work to set standards for group members, create a curriculum, select lecturers, organise exams and oversee students’ practical work, so that a future training school could be implemented. By striking coincidence a more comprehensive association but along identical lines had been created concurrently in...
Victoria, so amalgamation with the New South Wales association was discussed and eventually carried to create the ‘Australasian Massage Association’ in 1907.

On 15 November 1907 the new ‘Medical Gymnastics Department’ was opened officially, and became the New South Wales centre for instruction in what we now know as ‘physiotherapy.’ It was the first physiotherapy training school in the state and was operated by both RPA and Royal North Shore hospitals. In its first year, Annie Walker led the training. The school was housed in two temporary buildings on St John’s College land next door to RPA, and also in an annex in the grounds of Royal North Shore hospital.

Prince Alfred Hospital Gazette of 5 November 1907 reported on the department’s striking popularity in the month of its official opening, claiming that it had: “developed to quite an unexpected degree, and is now one of the most sought after branches of hospital work. On the afternoons on which the department is open, the vestibule is crowded with patients, waiting their turn to be massaged or to undergo the varieties of treatment which are ordered by the medical officers.” (p2). As a result there was an increase made to the number of honorary massage staff, with several extra women employed to meet the demand for treatment.

By the end of World War One, surgeons who had gained enormous experience in the knowledge and treatment of orthopaedic cases during the war, returned to Australia keen to create an orthopaedic department in connection with the medical gymnastics service at RPA. They believed that ‘after-treatment’ such as massage, exercises, electricity or various types of baths would greatly benefit patients in cases where surgical operation was not recommended.

By 1920 the Repatriation Department regarded RPA its chief hospital, and the advances of the Medical Gymnastics Department were highlighted in the June 30 issue of Royal Prince Alfred Hospital Gazette: “…during the last three or four years no department of the hospital has shown such increase in organisation and equipment as the department of massage, medical gymnastics and electricity.” (p28).

The Australian Jockey Club assisted to buy much-needed apparatus including electrical plant, machines for exercises and for baths, and helped to make it a well-staffed and well-equipped department. By this time it was housed in almost the whole of the basement of the Albert Pavilion, divided into separate spaces. These contained consultation, waiting and electrical rooms, rooms for hot air equipment, a gymnasium, and a whirlpool bath room. Specific treatment rooms for women, men and children were created. Outpatients as well as inpatients were treated. The standard of medical work was kept to a high standard because of the presence of students, and it was seen as progressive department. In 1922 a splint mechanic was appointed for the first time.

During the 1930s poliomyelitis epidemics meant that RPA needed to focus on the needs of patients with musculo-skeletal disorders, and this helped to elevate the role of the masseurs and masseuses. Around 1940 the massage department changed its name to the ‘Physiotherapy Department’, but the date that this actually happened is unknown. At the 1939 ‘Australian Massage Association’ conference it was agreed to change its name to the ‘Australian Physiotherapy Association’, which became official in 1940.

Pioneering work in physiotherapy continued to take place over the next decades at RPA. Physiotherapists in general gained increased status in their profession, and by the 1970s were required to have a much broader, University-degreed knowledge. In 2015, 21 physiotherapy university courses operate in Australia offering bachelor, masters and clinical doctorate programs. There continues to be a high level of research at RPA including clinical, academic, and research physiotherapy.

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Why not visit the RPA Museum?

Or take the self-guided walking tour?

Email: rpah.museum@sswahsn.nsw.gov.au
Phone: 9515 9201

The Museum is open Monday, Tuesday & Wednesday from 10am to 2pm.

We are located on Level 8 of the King George V Building and admission is free!

Copies of the tour are available at the Enquires Desk.

Also... if you are looking for a gift we have many books and memorabilia related to RPA’s long and distinguished history.