

Guest Editorial: Ann Bonner

Remembering the past. lessons for renal health care professionals

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There are many reasons to look back in time such as trying to learn from the past or to avoid repeating it. History also tells us where we have come from and how this has shaped the current environment in which we live, socialise and work. Renal health care has also been shaped by the past, and insights from the past can help us to face the challenges of the present, and in turn to see how the future might be. This issue of the RSA Journal is looking back to the period between 1960 and 1980; a period of many changes in health care delivery in general and, for us, the emergence of specialised renal health care for people with acute and chronic kidney disorders. This period also saw the formation of the Australian Society of Extracorporeal Circulation in 1969 and the Dialysis Society of Australasia in 1972. In 1996 the name was changed to The Renal Society of Australasia, reflecting more accurately, the diverse roles of renal professionals.

Our understanding about the kidney dates back to Ancient Greece when Hippocrates and Galen describe the first renal disease, nephrolithiasis. Since that time our understanding of the importance of the kidney, its diseases and the subsequent problems which arise when the kidneys fail has increased dramatically. The significant break through discovery and invention occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and led to the first dialysis for acute renal failure being performed in 1924 by Dr Haas (Gottschalk & Fellner, 1997). Nevertheless, chronic renal replacement therapies did not commence until the middle of the 20th century.

A search of the Medical Journal of Australia using the keywords 'renal' and 'kidney' for the period 1930-1980 uncovered a total of 323 articles were found. However, between 1930 and 1962 no articles were found in this journal relating to chronic or end stage kidney disease or dialysis. Dique (1955) successfully performed haemodialysis for acute renal failure at the Royal Brisbane Hospital in 1954. In Australia and New Zealand, the 1960s also marked the introduction of chronic renal replacement therapy and in 1963 the first kidney transplant procedure was performed in Australia. Since then renal health care provision changed, and several of the eminent pioneer nephrologists who were working at that time have written for this issue.

In nursing, the first Australian publication occurred in 1966 in which Steinbeck described the prolongation of life by dialysis. The 1960s also saw the beginnings of the renal specialty for nursing, and this was followed shortly afterwards by the introduction of post-registration renal nursing courses in Sydney and Melbourne. Renal nursing is unique as it involves sophisticated understanding of highly technical equipment, the acquisition of specialised knowledge and skills in a context where patients have highly complex health problems simultaneously with an underpinning chronic condition. The pioneering nurses, technicians and allied professionals of the 1970s, many of who have contributed to this issue, rapidly acquired new knowledge and skills, and it was this that was particularly instrumental

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in the establishment of home dialysis training centres and satellite dialysis units. All of these we take for granted today.

To the pioneers of renal health care in Australia – medical, technical and nursing staff, many of who remain connected with renal health care – your contribution to this issue of the RSA Journal through the documentation of your recollections, experiences and reflections about providing renal health care is highly appreciated; it will be valued by others into the future. We encourage all renal health professionals to take a moment to read the stories from the past and to be amazed at the photographs included in this special issue.

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