

From the Drawer to Stories: how the health library brought 150 years of Horsham Hospital history to life

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ABSTRACT

Horsham Hospital in Victoria has a long history. It is also the site for Australia's first known spinal block anaesthetic in 1902. In 2024, the hospital celebrated its 150th year of operation. This event required a great deal of work sifting through a jumbled "archive" of ephemera by the onsite health librarian. This work was, however, successful in bringing together community and health care staff through the stories of the past. Health librarians are often expected to do this work unfunded and ad hoc and while this can be extremely difficult to do at times, the benefits can be worthwhile. Strategic investment in health service archival practice, is however, needed.

In 2024, the Horsham hospital in Victoria – now part of Grampians Health – acknowledged its 150th year of operations. This report reflects on our experience as hospital librarians gathering the stories of the past, which helped our staff and community celebrate this major milestone.

As one of four Grampians Health librarians, Michelle has an interest in how our member hospitals were founded. She enjoys hunting through the historical record, which is just as well, because the reality is that our hospital archives are messy, eclectic bundles of reports, documents, uncategorised photos in boxes and albums, very old patient record books, scrapbooks, clippings, and random old medical equipment. For example, Horsham library has three Pinard horns – a type of stethoscope used to listen to the fetal heartbeat during pregnancy – in different sizes and materials. Interesting, but why?

It's a jumbled conglomeration of ephemeral noise that could have potential meaning if only there were time and finances to make that meaning a coherent reality. Despite this overwhelming pile, Michelle began poking into it during the COVID years, aiming

to track down some interesting facts about Horsham's healthcare past that could be faithfully shared and preserved for the historic record.

As health librarians, we have all experienced the time when someone randomly drops by and asks a specific history question that sees us digging through the "archives" for an answer. Grampians Health Library has been diligent these past two years, digitising and uploading our member hospital annual reports into our [Grampians Health Archives and Research Repository](#) (GHARR). This project alone has proved essential to many of these random questions and our own research. [We get quite excited by annual reports now – especially when they're dated 1858!](#) These documents are often treated as disposable, but they're so important to the hospital's historic record.

Digging into a hospital's history and then recounting it in an accessible way is, in essence, storytelling. Hospital librarians take on this extra "hat" and are often required to piece together fragments of truth and fact to answer those ad hoc history questions which inevitably arise. We need to critically appraise and cross-check these facts and we need to identify photos of people – usually, former staff – placing them into the fabric of "the times," and telling their stories within the context of the specific hospital.

For the 150th anniversary of the Horsham hospital, Michelle spent time between her usual tasks, cross-referencing images to reports, trawling news articles in [Trove](#), piecing and matching data points into thematic wholes. Despite having casually dipped in and out of our fonds these past few years, Michelle still spent in excess of 100 hours across the first eight months of 2024 building our knowledge about the people and timeline of the Horsham hospital. The notes she created ended up being used in promotional and marketing materials, radio and newspaper pieces, leadership speeches, commemorative posters, and local public library displays. To do all this, Michelle relied heavily on our historical archive, GHARR, Trove newspapers, and other monographs kept in the jumble of ephemera stuffed into various cupboards and drawers.

We would have liked to have gone to our local historical society to dig for more, but as there was no budget for paying the research fees required, we had to work with what was at hand or free to access. Regretfully, we also didn't tap into the vast resource that is the local Past Trainee Nurses group – who have many stories, along with truckloads of old ephemera and memories for identifying former staff in old photos! That was a lost opportunity for us, mainly due to pure ignorance at the time. But now we know and will take advantage of this resource in the future. We recommend reaching out through your volunteer program or local Historical Society to find these people if they're still around! It may save you time.

Grampians Health was fortunate in that our Communications team embraced the Horsham 150th celebration early and enthusiastically. We had a committee established by the beginning of May 2024 and began working on the celebration – scheduled for Monday, August 26th, 2024 (Horsham hospital's "official" birthdate is August 27th, 1874). Michelle spent considerable time identifying the young nurses in a 1917 photo, and this became a leading image for the celebration.



L to R: Miss Curran, Miss Booth, Miss Anderson (behind railing), Matron Annie G. Duffy (seated); Miss McCarlie (seated on ground), Miss Veitch (at back), Miss McClounan, Miss Hawkin, Miss Haycock. Horsham District Hospital about 1917.

We decided that hospital staff should be the focus of the celebration, because in reflecting on stories about past and present staff, we could help build a sense of camaraderie which comes from belonging to a longstanding continuum of care; something that would engender pride after the maelstrom years of COVID. We also have staff whose relatives had also worked long careers at this hospital before them, so that sense of family ancestry can be very powerful.

Other ideas flagged were a circulating 'Memory Book' in which current and former staff - and the public - could write a memory about their career or about their experiences at this hospital: a case of saving the stories of today for the historic archives of the future?

We developed a colouring-in competition for local primary school children focused on a character we nicknamed Dr Harrie Healthcare, a gender-neutral medical professional.

Michelle's job was to find factual stories that would inspire action for these activities. What would make staff want to recount their memories? This question had us tell stories about former staff: about our doctors, nurses, and matrons. What would

inspire children to enter our colouring-in competition and maybe – just maybe – think about working at this hospital someday? Here, we told a story about how people with broken legs and typhoid fevers had to bounce about on open-air bullock trays or on horseback across rough bushland to get to Stawell hospital, 65km away.

These simple stories, researched in depth to ensure they were factual as well as entertaining, garnered much success with the Memory Book and colouring competition.

There was more besides! The communications team developed a series of posters that told the stories Michelle was working on. She was also the designated public radio voice for our celebrations and did at least two radio spots plus a couple of local paper interviews. The key to success here lay in being able to recount fast points of historic “trivia” – with dates, places, names: little stories that can capture interest and the imagination of the community.

Did you know that Horsham Hospital is the site of Australia’s first known spinal anaesthetic block? It was performed by Dr Robert Ritchie on January 7th, 1902, and was done so he could perform a leg amputation on a 78-year-old male. It’s an extraordinary story, which we found both fascinating and inspiring. You can read Dr Ritchie’s 1902 account of this pivotal event in the reference link below this article. Horsham Hospital’s legacy to Australian medicine, particularly anaesthesia, has been a wonderful journey of discovery and has impressed on us the value of adding knowledge of archival practice to our professional capabilities and duties as health librarians.

For the day of the anniversary celebration, 26th August 2024, we set up a display of posters, original photos – some dating back to the late 1800s – medical equipment, and ephemera in our Horsham hospital boardroom, and this became part of a hospital-wide tour we offered at our main event. Over 100 people, former staff and community members enjoyed the celebration. The Communications team had placed a number of large core flute posters about the campus, detailing facts about Horsham hospital’s history. A few former nurses on the tour, reminisced long and happily in the library, as they pored over photos of former staff. The day proved to be great fun... if a lot of work!

Reflecting on this journey, we’ve learned that there is a fantastic return on investment in preparing historical stories about a hospital, especially in terms of how the stories told can engender ownership, brand recognition, and public satisfaction. But we do need a better way to manage our eclectic and incredibly important archives across all our member hospitals at Grampians Health.

There needs to be investment into the planned, strategic bridge-building work required to make each hospital's historical archive functional, effective, and accessible. Hospital librarians can ill-afford to waste time poking around in an unfunded, messy archive, even if it's really interesting. Simultaneously, our history collections are as important to our usual work of delivering best evidence, but only insofar as that history can and should tell a great story.

Historical archives – digital and analogue - need context and conservation to be useful. We expect our clinicians to be on the front foot of the latest medical evidence, discarding outdated and disproven practices, while our local communities demand we prioritise pride in *their* hospital's history, often judging us harshly on what we discard. It means, that for the hapless hospital librarian, we are managing our history collections to massage all available benefits from our public relations obligations, while also ensuring our staff are reaping benefits from current best evidence. Which of these is our "real job"? We believe both of these aspects are of mutual importance to our roles as health librarians.

Historic stories can be immensely valuable to hospital leadership, even if they only seem to realise that when there's an imminent anniversary! This ensures our historical collections are every bit as important, deserving the same kind of recognition and investment as our usual daily work in evidentiary discovery. The two polarities in our collections, past and present, are interchangeable even if they carry a wide spectrum of challenges around truth-telling, facts, change and evidence.

Grampians Health Library plans to develop a formal collections policy for receiving and keeping historical items so that there is a clear procedure for what and why we keep what we do. We also need to explicitly detail how we'll arrange our archival collections so they're effective and, above all, efficient to access. Much of what we have in our drawers and cupboards needs digitising, so this access becomes easy for people. It is a vital step in that bridge-building needed to manage the sometimes wildly different expectations of our communities and staff when it comes to our role within the hospital.

Our digital historical archive, GHARR, receives many hits per week because when we digitise our reports and images, they are accessible by anyone with an internet connection. It has been hugely successful, but there is so much more archival work that must be done. The enormous number of random images, document ephemera, old medical equipment, historic books, and memoirs, needs to be properly contextualised into their time, place, and purpose. All this effort will require time and attention as well as investment in the library's capacity and its librarians' capabilities. We are not archivists, but we need to know some of what archivists know. Sooner rather than later.

The journey of uncovering and celebrating 150 years of Horsham hospital's history has highlighted the invaluable role of hospital librarians in preserving and narrating the past. Through diligent research and – sometimes epic - storytelling, we have brought to life the rich heritage of Horsham hospital, fostering a sense of pride and continuity among staff and the community. This endeavour has underscored the importance of investing in organised and accessible archives, ensuring that the hospital's historical records from each of its founding member health services, are preserved and utilised effectively.

As hospital librarians, we balance the demands of providing current clinical evidence with the need to maintain and share our hospitals' historical narratives. This dual role enriches our professional practice and strengthens the connection between past and present, enhancing public relations and community engagement. Moving forward, strategic investment in archival practice will be crucial to preserving our member hospitals' legacies while also supporting the ongoing work of health librarians in telling the stories that bridge history with modern healthcare.

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