

JANE BELL

Jane Bell, OBE, was born on a farm in Scotland in 1873. Both her parents and four of her siblings died of tuberculosis when Jane was still a child. Jane and her two surviving sisters and their brother emigrated to Sydney in 1886. Jane trained as a nurse at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney and was appointed Matron of the hospital in Bundaberg, Queensland, in 1903, and of the Brisbane General Hospital in 1904.

Jane went to London in 1906 for midwifery training and served as deputy superintendent of nursing at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. Jane Bell returned to Australia in 1910 to take up an appointment as 'Lady Superintendent', (as many hospital Matrons were then known), of the Royal Melbourne Hospital, a position she held until 1934.

At the outbreak of World War I, Jane Bell was appointed Principal Matron of the First Australian General Hospital. She was immediately embroiled in a conflict of her own, taking on the military establishment in order to retain control of the army nurses. She was unsuccessful, and asked to return to Australia. However, an inquiry into the administration of the First Australian General Hospital vindicated her stand and paved the way for the 1916 re-organisation of the Australian Army Medical and Nursing Services maintaining it as a distinct unit with its own command structure.

Miss Bell was very strict with her nursing staff, insisting on a disciplined approach to work and a very high standard of training. She continued to campaign for recognition of the importance of nursing and achieved many reforms in working conditions and training. Jane Bell appointed a Tutor Sister at the Melbourne Hospital in 1920 and instituted a six-week preliminary training course in 1927. Jane Bell also devoted much of her time to advancing the status of nursing as a profession, and restructured nursing organizations.

Jane Bell was a foundation member of the Australasian Trained Nurses' Association in 1899, a member of the Royal Victorian Trained Nurses' Association (which became the Royal Victorian College of Nursing), and of the Nurses' Board between 1924 and 1950. During her terms as President of the College in the 1930s, Miss Bell assisted in setting up the Colleges' postgraduate training courses in 1934.

Her greatest challenge was to eliminate the perception of nurses as ladies with lamps, rather than trained professionals. In her view, all aspects of nursing – training, education, conditions and remuneration – were equally important, and she objected to the approach of many nurses' organizations which concentrated on industrial conditions in the 1930s. Several of her recommendations for the future organization of the profession formed the basis of her cogent evidence to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Social Security in 1944.

Jane Bell died on 6 August 1959¹.

Many of the military Matrons, like Jane Bell, returned to their civilian charges. In hospitals all over the nation, Matrons' and senior Sisters' military experience consolidated hierarchical rank structures in the profession. Apart from psychiatric care, nursing became further entrenched as 'women's work'. Some women with war experience went their own way.

¹ J Williams and R Goodman, *Jane Bell, OBE, (1873-1959), Lady Superintendent, The Royal Melbourne Hospital, 1910-1940*, 1988.