

Dan Astley Gresswell (1853-1904)

Dan Astley Gresswell (1853-1904), public health administrator, was born on 11 September 1853 at Louth, Lincolnshire, England, second of eight sons and seven daughters of Dan Gresswell, veterinarian, and his wife Ann, née Beastall. Six of the sons became prominent in medicine or the veterinary profession. Dan senior was elected fellow of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons for original researches and was active in local politics promoting sanitary improvements.

Dan Astley matriculated in 1871 at Oxford and won a scholarship to Christ Church to read physical sciences (B.A., 1875). After studying physiology in Germany at Würzburg and Bonn, he entered St Bartholomew's (Bart's) Hospital and in 1881 graduated M.B. (Oxon.) and M.R.C.S. (London); he gained the Cambridge Sanitary Science Certificate in 1884.

After graduation in 1881 he spent nine months at Stockwell Asylum Board Hospital (returning in 1886-87) and a year as house physician at Bart's. Then, to determine the effects of climate on the communicable diseases, he visited South Africa. Next he became surgeon-superintendent to the South Australian Emigration Service and spent three months in 1883 visiting the chief cities of Australia. On 27 November 1883 at Christ Church, Adelaide, he married Agnes Neill.

On his return to England Gresswell was an assistant demonstrator at Bart's, then worked as temporary medical inspector for the Local Government Board before investigating the sanitary state of the major cities of Europe. In 1889 he was awarded M.D. (Oxon.) for his thesis, 'A contribution to the natural history of scarlatina ...', with a recommendation, acted on by the university in 1890, that it be published. He received M.D. (Melb.) *ad eund.* in 1891.

In 1889 he was appointed medical inspector of the new Victorian Board of Public Health, established as the outcome of a royal commission into the sanitary state of Melbourne. Under the amending Public Health Act of 1889 responsibility for health matters devolved on the local councils. As the source of the board's expertise Gresswell came to the job supremely well trained and with the highest recommendations. His handling of the influenza epidemic raging in Victoria when he arrived in March 1890, won him the gratitude of the premier, the respect of the medical profession and the lasting confidence of the public.

In October he presented his 'Report on the sanitary condition and sanitary administration of Melbourne and its suburbs', showing Melbourne to be most insalubrious. A key concept of the report was the employment by local authorities of salaried full-time medical officers of health. Major objectives were the establishment of at least one infectious diseases hospital; control of tuberculosis through elimination of tubercular cattle by veterinarians; isolation and treatment of patients in special sanatoriums (the first was established in 1903); and education in management of sputa. The DO NOT SPIT signs built into the walls of many public buildings and the Gresswell Sanatorium are memorials to his campaigns. Gresswell had used his inquiry to meet and educate the local councils because he believed in education rather than legal coercion. He made effective use of widely distributed pamphlets to achieve sanitary reform. The report also stressed the need for a pure water-supply, underground sewerage (with a double pan system in the interim) and specific measures to ensure

unadulterated food and drink. From the mid-1890s he drafted a series of bills to achieve these purposes, including the Meat Supervision (1900), Wine Adulteration (1900) and Pure Food (1905) Acts, which when enacted made Victoria a leader in this area. Some of his recommendations for milk handling (1896) were passed in 1905 but compulsory pasteurization against tuberculosis and typhoid was delayed until 1943. [Ed. Note: These public health measures were strongly supported by his collaboration with Dr John Springthorpe, a contemporary physician promoting Robert Koch's postulates on the germ theory of disease, especially regarding tuberculosis, the principal cause of death in young adults at that time.]

The 1889 Health Act had excluded any doctor from chairmanship of the Board of Public Health. The 1894 debates to amend the Act and allow for Gresswell's appointment reveal him as outstandingly competent and efficient, unfailingly courteous and humane, and very highly esteemed by all those who knew or worked with him.

The decline in Victorian death rates between 1890 and 1904 must be attributed in part to Gresswell. In addition, Victoria's relative immunity to the 1900 plague outbreak also testified to his foresight and efficiency. He demonstrated what an exceptional administrator could achieve despite defective legislation. In spite of his youthful appearance the medical profession acknowledged his zeal and special knowledge and, impressed by his clear, incisive and eminently practical remarks and his sanitary inventions, elected him president of the British Medical Association, Victorian branch, as early as 1893. [Ed. Note: also 1894 and 1903].

In 1896 Gresswell initiated and chaired the first of the intercolonial quarantine conferences. He co-authored the Royal Society of Victoria's 1892 report on cremation and on 11 December ignited the first authorized cremation in the colony, the body of a Chinese leper. His work was so very much his life that he took no holidays. Yet he possessed a gentle sense of humour. His only relaxations seem to have been music and various hospital balls, although at Oxford he had been a noted sculler. After smelling the Yarra he forswore further rowing.

In November 1898 Gresswell suffered a severe attack of jaundice from which he never fully recovered. He died of septicaemia on 10 December 1904, survived by his wife; they had no children. He was buried in the Anglican section of Boroondara cemetery.

Last updated; 10 January 2025

Principal source: Diana Dyason, Australian Dictionary of Biography, Vol.9, 1983

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