

Hinchcliffe, Edwin (1839-1909)

Edwin Hinchcliffe MD Edinburgh 1870 MRCS England 1871 MD Melbourne 1872 a.e.g. President of Medical Society of Victoria 1891.

In 1885 the *Bendigo Advertiser* reported that Dr Edwin Hinchcliffe was seriously injured, and his horse had been killed. What sad news of a highly respected doctor of Sandhurst, Victoria.

The story unfolded that Surgeon Major Hinchcliffe was going to a Military Review at Flemington of the 4th Battalion in the Melbourne suburb of Footscray. Men and horses were being taken from the train when another train steamed into the station. According to the newspaper report, another horse took fright, plunged and fell onto the tracks. Hinchcliffe's horse, a little black mare, somersaulted across the rails and was caught by an approaching engine..... "breaking almost every bone in her body." Poor Doctor Hinchcliffe had "an injury to his foot, his sword trodden upon, and his uniform damaged..... his saddle and bridle were torn to shreds." The report describes in detail the whole gruesome event. He survived and continued to follow his profession as a Surgeon in Bendigo (Sandhurst).

Six years later he was elected by his peers as President of the Medical Society of Victoria.

He was referred to as Surgeon Major Hinchcliffe as he was a proud member of the Victorian Military Forces, the old Sandhurst Cavalry Troup and the 5th Battalion. In his later years he transferred into the Australian Army Medical Corps where he rose to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. It was said that he often wore his bright red military uniform for special events.

His military involvement was but a hobby; his real career was Medicine.

Edwin was not a Doctor of Medicine when he first came to Australia. His family were owners of woollen mills in Yorkshire and reasonably well off financially. He worked in the mills for a time before studying Medicine at Edinburgh University. Edwin completed first year of study but due to the financial Depression in England at that time and the collapse of the family business he returned to Yorkshire. The family sought a new direction and travelled to Australia in 1857, settling in Mortlake in rural Victoria.

William Horsfall Hinchcliffe, his brother, was already studying Medicine in Edinburgh stayed to complete his course and graduated in 1855 with MD and LRCS Edinburgh LSA London. The positivity of the family migration encouraged William to travel to Australia too. He saw working in rural Victoria a suitable option and in 1862, he joined his family and set up a medical practice in Mortlake.

Edwin moved around the Western District of Victoria working as a travelling salesman and a mining agent. Fortunately, he saved enough money to return to Scotland in 1867 and resumed his studies in Edinburgh. He was 28 years old, graduating in 1870. Whilst in Edinburgh it is said he worked with Professor James Simpson, of chloroform fame. He returned to Melbourne where he obtained a position at the Melbourne Hospital as a resident medical officer in 1872.

There is recorded information about issues at the Melbourne Hospital regarding confrontation between him, the Hospital Board and visitors. The issues were trivial but obviously disturbing to Dr Hinchcliffe. The Hospital Board investigated an insulting anonymous letter about a patient's care, said to be written by Dr Hinchcliffe. It was never proven; hence he was given an apology. Another time Dr Hinchcliffe was reported to have asked a visitor to the hospital to remove his hat and the issue was

brought to the attention of the Board. Further investigation revealed confrontation between Dr Hinchcliffe and an American resident of Melbourne, a Mr Henri Hart. This man from New York was a businessman living in the colony holding positions at various times as the Commissioner of the Supreme Court, Consul for the United States, Vice Consul for Italy and on many committees, including that of the Melbourne Hospital and the Eye and Ear Hospital. Obviously, both men did not like each other. There are other circumstances where Mr Hart's behaviour in the Hospital did not meet Dr Hinchcliffe's standards. The whole situation appeared to be trying for both parties and ultimately, the Doctor resigned- never sacked!

Fortunately, he moved to rural Victoria when he was appointed as a Resident Medical Officer at the Bendigo Hospital. The rest of his life would be spent mostly in this flourishing town on the Goldfields, northwest of Melbourne.

It was reported in the press in 1879, Dr Hinchcliffe had difficulties with the Hospital Board in Bendigo too. The financial state of the hospital was not good, and the Board suggested cutting bed numbers and costs by reducing medical staff particularly by foregoing the Assistant Surgeon position. The resident surgeon alone (Dr Hinchcliffe) was asked to perform all medical duties for three months! He informed the Board that no important duty would be neglected but it would be impossible for one man to perform the duties adequately and do justice to the patients under his care. He asked the members of the Board to make other arrangements to improve the efficiency of the hospital. At the same time, he stated that the hospital food was not well cooked. The Matron advised that the cook had left. It was decided to advertise in The Argus and increase the salary of the cook! Dr Hinchcliffe was just someone not afraid to speak up!

After 6 years in the hospital, he entered private practice in View Street Bendigo and became a successful private surgeon and community member. His home in View Street was the old parsonage of All Saints Church in Mackenzie Street. At the age of 48, he married for the first time. He married a Miss Alice Jackson, eldest daughter of the ironmonger-shopkeeper Mr. Henry Jackson of View Street and sister of another Bendigo doctor Harold Edgar Ethering Jackson.

As many Doctors in those days, his community commitment was notable. He belonged to the Masonic Lodge, the Fire Brigade, President of the Bendigo Liedertafel (Choir), Health Officer for the Strathfieldsaye Shire, member of the Jockey Club where he was a member and surgeon of the Course. He was the President of the Sandhurst Football Club and a member of the Sandhurst Club in View Street.

Edwin Hinchcliffe possessed leadership qualities and was elected President of the Medical Society of Victoria for 1891. At that Annual Meeting he commented he would do his best despite not living in Melbourne. The major issues of his presidency were similar to previous years: Infectious diseases, Medical honorary appointments to Government positions and hospitals, the registration of doctors, research particularly "Koch's cure and tuberculin." Newer issues were the existence of the two Medical Associations and what was their future, the Intercolonial Medical Congress of 1892, and the "Club system" of care or "contract care".

In Victoria there was disharmony between the Friendly Societies and Lodges and the medical profession. Hinchcliffe as President in 1891 would have been well aware of all the compounding issues: the method of delivery of care, home visits versus attendance of patients at rooms, payment for the doctors by the societies and abuse of the system by wealthy patients using a system designed primarily for those with less money. Such scenarios were not new, even today.

Many such societies existed throughout the colonies. The Friendly societies on the Goldfields in Ballarat and Bendigo did provide significant medical care to large concentrations of relatively poor populations. They offered medical care and dispensary services for a small annual fee. In 1891 BUFS (Bendigo) had over 3000 members. The byproduct of this arrangement in these two towns was the overwhelming interest by Friendly Societies Doctors in Public Health problems of the miners and their families.

Probably the most relevant outcome to the medical profession in Victoria of this disharmony was the uniting of doctors into one Professional Association. The amalgamation of the British Medical Association Victoria and the Medical Society of Victoria occurred in 1907 to have a united and strong voice. They were the winners.

In 1897 Edwin left Bendigo and returned to Melbourne because of his health. A farewell by the Bendigo men including representatives of the legal profession, musical groups, the Jockey Club, the Military and other Doctors gave testimony to his excellent qualities. He was noted to be one of Bendigo's "best citizens." He returned thanks, saying he had met "nothing but kindness from the poorest to the richest." He hoped he would recover his strength and health to return.

Between 1897 and 1900 he consulted at 32 Collins St. Melbourne, described as two doors from the Melbourne Club. There was nothing found in the literature concerning his health but within a year his address was again in Bendigo. He had an advertisement in the Bendigo Advertiser January 1899 notifying the public that he was resuming practice at his home in Mackenzie St Golden Square.

His medical interests were all encompassing. Living in an area of mining, many men suffered the consequences of working deep underground in the mines. The term Miners' Phthisis or Miner's Lung was a major health concern in Bendigo. Families of miners were also at risk due to men returning home in their underground gear for their wives to wash! At the turn of the century, the respiratory related deaths in Bendigo men were six times that of Victorian adult males. Ultimately it was shown that the fine silica dust and the tuberculosis bacilli were the causal factors. Ballarat, where most of the mining was alluvial, lung disease was not so prevalent.

The new speciality in Medicine arose out of the mining industry- Public Health. Names you read associated with this interest were Doctors Eadie, Cowen, Summons and Perrin Norris. Dr Walter Summons being the holder of the first Diploma of Public Health from the University of Melbourne in 1908. Dr Hinchcliffe did make observant contributions to the cause of miner's illnesses and deaths.

"All persons working underground for any time had a deposit of black pigment in the lungs. Chiefly derived from the smoke of candles and lamps being inspired which, if neglected or long continued acted as an irritant predisposing and exciting cause of lung disease"

Summons took opinions from all these Bendigo doctors to prepare the Reports for Government with recommendations for mine management to introduce drastic changes. These regulations were the corner stones of occupational health and workers' compensation.

Walter Summons, an astute doctor born in Ballarat, was elected as the President of the BMA in 1936.

Researching the men named on the Honour Boards in the AMA Headquarters in Parkville, Edwin Hinchcliffe was the first rural doctor to become President of the Medical Society of Victoria. He dedicated over 30 years of his working life to Bendigo, previously known as Sandhurst.

He did live and travelled in rural Victoria as a young man before resuming his medical studies, so he understood country life and its people. In his farewell address from the Medical Society of Victoria he stressed the honour he had been bestowed by the members electing him President and he hoped in the not-so-distant future another from outside the metropolitan area would be elected president.

He died in May 1909, his obituary saying he had been in poor health for two months. Annie survived until 1933. They had no children. Edwin and Annie were buried in the White Hills Cemetery Bendigo. With time, their graves have deteriorated, and it is not known whether the headstones are still there.



By Jean Douglas 2025

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