

Stawell, Sir Richard Rawdon (1864-1935)

Sir Richard Rawdon Stawell (1864-1935), physician, was born on 14 March 1864 at Kew, Melbourne, sixth child of Sir William Foster Stawell and his wife Mary Frances Elizabeth, née Greene. Florence Melian Stawell was a sister. Educated at Marlborough College, England, Hawthorn Grammar School, Victoria, and the University of Melbourne (M.B., 1887; B.S., 1888; M.D., 1890), Stawell graduated with the scholarship in medicine. He was resident medical officer at (Royal) Melbourne Hospital (1888) and the Hospital for Sick Children (1889) where he was influenced by William Snowball.

In 1890-92 Stawell undertook three years postgraduate work in bacteriology, biochemistry and physiology. In London he studied at the National Hospital for Diseases of the Nervous System, Queen's Square, and the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Sick Children. After completing the Diploma of Public Health (London) in 1891, he did further research at Tübingen, Germany, and visited clinics in the United States of America before returning home.

With his hopes of a private income and a career of academic research dashed by the bank crash, he commenced private practice in Collins Street where he lived with his colleagues, Hamilton Russell and A. Jeffreys Wood. Stawell also formed a firm friendship with (Sir) Charles Martin, then professor of physiology at the university. Honorary physician to the Children's Hospital in 1893-1914 and to out-patients at Melbourne Hospital in 1903-19, Stawell introduced the most recent scientifically-based practice of medicine and raised clinical teaching to the highest level. With his Socratic approach, knowledge and kindly interest in patients and students, he rapidly became pre-eminent as a teacher and a clinician. He demanded high standards and inspired two generations of students. One of them, (Sir) Sidney Sewell, remembered him as 'a tall alert young man with clear-cut delightful enunciation of well-chosen English and a vivid, magnetic personality'. (Sir) Macfarlane Burnet found him 'a man of much wisdom and immense charm', but with 'a waspish intolerance of stupidity'. Stawell published a wide range of scholarly articles and in 1898-1900 edited the *Intercolonial Medical Journal*.

On 12 August 1908 at St Andrew's Anglican Church, Brighton, Stawell married Evelyn Myrrhee Connolly, matron of the Foundling Hospital, East Melbourne. He was elected president of the Victorian branch of the British Medical Association in 1910. In 1915 he enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force, embarking in May as lieutenant-colonel in charge of the medical section, 3rd Australian General Hospital. He served with distinction in Egypt and at Lemnos until invalided home in June 1916. On his return he became a member of the appeal board of the Repatriation Department. In 1917 Stawell went back to Melbourne Hospital and from 1919 was physician to in-patients. He resigned in 1924 to become a consulting physician. A member of the hospital's board of management in 1905-35, he was president in 1928. He was unanimously elected inaugural president (1930-32) of the Association of Physicians of Australasia (Royal Australasian College of Physicians).

Throughout his career Stawell was concerned with the wider responsibilities of the medical profession in society. As an undergraduate he had supported the admission of women to medical courses. He later attacked the degrading public election of medical staff to Melbourne Hospital and, through the board of management, had it replaced by appointment through an advisory board in 1910. He campaigned against infant mortality linked to gastroenteritis, and successfully advocated closer links

between the university and the hospital. In 1930 he chaired a public meeting to establish the Victorian Council of Mental Hygiene which he then served as chairman until his death. A councillor of Trinity College for thirty years and a director of the National Mutual Life Assurance Society, he was knighted in 1929 for his services to medicine and the community.

Wide-ranging in his interests, Stawell had been a tennis champion as an undergraduate; he was later a member of the Royal Melbourne Golf Club. An enthusiastic canoeist and an expert fly-fisher, he belonged to a medico-legal fishing group and was known for his studious approach to the sport. Tall and angular, he had been prominent in undergraduate debates and plays. Maie (Lady) Casey recalled that Dick Stawell could be 'extremely entertaining in his somewhat high-pitched precise voice'. He had a lifelong appreciation of music and painting. A member of the Melbourne Club, he was president in 1920.

After his marriage Stawell lived and practised at 45 Spring Street, Melbourne. He died there on 18 April 1935 and was cremated. His wife, two daughters and son survived him. At the time of his death he was president-elect of the British Medical Association; that year he was posthumously made a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, England. His Australian colleagues paid tribute to his influence. Professor W. A. Osborne recalled his 'dominant personality', 'quick and flexible intellect', 'disarming candour', 'lively sense of humour' and 'courtly gesture and address'. Jeffreys Wood described him as 'a figure who has reigned supreme in the history of Australian medicine'; Sewell saw him as 'the greatest of our Australian physicians'. The Sir Richard Stawell Oration, given in Melbourne from 1934 to 1986, commemorates his life and work. Portraits by W. B. McInnes are held by the Royal Melbourne Hospital and the family.

Last updated 4 March 2025

Source: F I R Martin, Australian Dictionary of Biography, Vol.12, 1990.



Richard R. Stowell