

## Dr John Springthorpe (1855-1933)

Dr John William Springthorpe was born on 29 August 1855 at Wolverhampton, Staffordshire, England. Brought in infancy to Balmain, Sydney, he was educated at Fort Street Model School, Sydney Grammar School and, from 1872, at Wesley College, Melbourne. He was a brilliant student at the University of Melbourne, winning several exhibitions and graduating Master of Arts, Bachelor of Medicine and Surgery in 1879 and [the higher degree of] Doctor of Medicine in 1884. After working as a medical officer at Beechworth Asylum, he went to England and became in 1881 the first Australian graduate admitted to membership of the Royal College of Physicians. Returning to Melbourne in late 1883, Springthorpe obtained posts as pathologist to the Alfred Hospital and out-patient physician to the Melbourne Hospital.

In 1887 he also became Melbourne University lecturer in therapeutics, dietetics and hygiene. His Collins Street practice as a physician flourished. He wrote numerous articles for medical and other journals, and published a two-volume textbook, *Therapeutics, Dietetics, and Hygiene* (1914). In medicine, apart from his private practice, his university and hospital work, Springthorpe was frequently a presenter and an official in congresses. He was active in medical politics, being secretary and, later, president of the Victorian branch of the British Medical Association in 1891 and president of the Melbourne Medical Association in 1900.

He led in setting up a training and registration system in dentistry and was the first dean of the faculty. He helped to found the Royal Victorian Trained Nurses Association, becoming its first president in 1901. He was first chairman of the Masseurs' Registration Board and was a strong advocate for massage (later called physiotherapy) in hospital work.

He enthusiastically supported first aid to the injured, not only by lecturing and examining but by joining the St John Ambulance council. He was a member, chairman and, later, President over a period of more than 40 years. He was invested as a Knight of the Order of St John.

In 1914 he enlisted in the Australian Army Medical Corps and, with the rank of lieutenant-colonel, became senior physician to No. 2 Australian General Hospital in Egypt. Springthorpe returned to Melbourne briefly in 1916 but was posted again to England where he worked with soldiers suffering from nervous disorders. His representations to Prime Minister Billy Hughes are credited as the reason no Australian soldier was executed for alleged cowardice and desertion through the impact of "shell shock". Returning home in 1919, he resumed his post of visitor to metropolitan asylums, recommenced private practice and worked for repatriation and the infant welfare movement. His work in asylums led Dr Cunningham Dax to regard Springthorpe as "one of the nineteenth century's greatest mental health reformers".

With the support of philanthropist Joseph Tweddle, he helped found the Tweddle Baby Home in Footscray and implemented the Plunkett mothercraft nursing services advocated by New Zealand paediatrician, Dr Truby King. He also helped found the Talbot Colony for the rehabilitative care of epileptic patients. Throughout his medical career he was a strong advocate for public health measures, particularly in the campaign against tuberculosis by control of cross-infection, pasteurisation of milk

and testing of cattle. He similarly advocated for clean water supply and provision of effective sewerage systems.

Felix Meyer's obituary said of him, "Throughout his career, independent thought and action and outspoken criticism were marked characteristics. With his independent spirit went a tenacity of purpose which made him formidable for those who did not see eye-to-eye with him. Anything like an abuse or misuse of authority roused his fighting spirit. And having espoused a cause, he threw himself wholeheartedly into it. He had great humanity. The pain and suffering of others touched him and moved him to action."

This basic humanitarianism and stubborn single-mindedness was also his greatest weakness. If there had been misadventure a perpetrator should be held to account. Outspoken criticism of perceived perpetrators, rather than pursuing solutions, led to major public conflicts that ultimately destroyed his reputation of important achievements.

Springthorpe died at Richmond on 22 April 1933 after a short illness and was buried in Boroondara cemetery, Kew. The great gates of the old Melbourne Hospital, which had been gifted to him, now form the entrance to the Springthorpe Park, which is opposite the Boyd Reserve in suburban Murrumbeena. The memorial plaque on the gates recalls his wife's bequest but not the reason for the Hospital gates being there. Were it not for the splendor of the Boroondara tomb there is little else to remind us of the contributions of a quite remarkable man.

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