

Summons, Walter Ernest Isaac (1881-1970)

Walter Ernest Isaac Summons (1881-1970), medical practitioner, was born on 7 July 1881 at Ballarat, Victoria, second son of Samuel Summons, school inspector, and his wife Elizabeth Ann, née Edwards, both Victorian born. Walter was educated at Scotch College and the University of Melbourne (M.B., 1903; B.S., 1904; M.D., 1907; D.P.H., 1908). His Diploma of Public Health was the first awarded in Victoria. Stringy and sandy throughout his life, while at university Summons represented Victoria at lacrosse.

In 1906 he was chosen by (Sir) Richard Stawell to investigate miners' phthisis at Bendigo. Summons linked the increase in respiratory disease mortality (from 77 per 10,000 in the late 1870s to 130 per 10,000 in 1906) to the spread of percussion rock drills which intensified silica dust, and to the bad ventilation of mines which had become the world's deepest. Bendigo miners died from lung ailments at six times the rate of Victorian adult males; related females and non-miner males had tuberculosis death-rates above their respective Victorian averages. Summons's reports on ventilation in 1906 and on the epidemiology of lung disease in 1907 were founded on detailed study of work practices and exact clinical observation. He recommended higher, mandatory standards of air quality and use of water jets with drills; employment underground of phthisics was to be prohibited and mine sanitation rules enforced; invalid miners and advanced tuberculosis cases were to receive additional state relief. His proposals were coolly received in Bendigo. Neither owners nor miners had supported his research: the former feared further state intervention with higher costs; the latter resented curbs on work habits. Moreover, the reports coincided with a downturn in mining productivity and profits. The government tacked Summons's recommendations to the Mines Act of 1907. Practice improved and lives were saved.

At university Summons had joined the Officers' Corps and begun a lifelong association with the army. In December 1914 he embarked for No. 1 Australian General Hospital at Heliopolis, Egypt, moving with that hospital to Rouen, France, in 1916. At the war's end he commanded the largest of the Australian hospitals, at Abbassia, Egypt. The youngest colonel commanding a military hospital in 1918, he was the oldest in July 1940 when he took charge of the 2/7th Australian General Hospital in the Middle East. Recalled in 1942 to Caulfield Military Hospital, he made a notable investigation of the persistence of bilharziasis. He was appointed O.B.E. in 1919, and mentioned in dispatches in both wars.

From 1919 Summons built a large private practice in Camberwell. An honorary physician and tutor at the Alfred Hospital in 1920-35, he was elected president of the Victorian branch of the British Medical Association in 1936. He held high ideals of medical service and was conciliatory to government proposals to redistribute the costs of medical attention. Between 1919 and 1968 he served on the Victorian Public Health Commission.

A devoted Anglican, Summons was vicar's warden for thirty years at St Mark's Church, Camberwell. He and his wife Viva St George, née Sproule (M.B., B.S., 1907), whom he had married at Holy Trinity Anglican Church, Kew, on 2 June 1909, were stalwarts of Camberwell Grammar School. Predeceased by his wife in 1956, he died on 10 May 1970 and was cremated. His three sons and one daughter

survived him. A distinguished medical-military colleague, Sir Geoffrey Newman-Morris, remembered Summons for his skill and for his 'capacity for friendship and command'.

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