

## **Recording Memories: Oral Histories of Dental Nurses/Therapists**

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When Margaret arrived in Wellington in 1941 to begin her training as a School Dental Nurse, World War Two was in full swing. Margaret moved into the Mansions Hostel in Ghuznee Street in the centre on town, with other young women who had also made the move to Wellington. She arrived at the hostel knowing no one and she had no choice who she roomed with. After being dropped off by taxi in Ghuznee Street, Margaret had problems moving her enormous trunk in which her mother had packed everything including long john combinations. Margaret shared a large room with a generous bay window that rattled in the notorious Wellington wind with three other girls. Her dinner got cold the first night she spent at the Mansions because the girls had to wait for the matron to 'make her entrance' before they could begin eating.

Some girls had been accepted to dental nursing because of academic merit, while others had been manpowered into dental work because it was perceived as an essential industry during the war. A sense of duty pervaded enrolment as a school dental nurse. Colonel J. L. Saunders had told an earlier class of trainee dental nurses: 'You are chosen women from the whole of New Zealand, physically and mentally, and I expect all of you to do your duty wherever you are sent.'

Margaret applied to the service because she knew from an early age that she wanted to work with children, but she also knew she did not want to teach. Margaret did not feel as though she fitted in straight away at the Mansions or at training school. The group was, in Margaret's words, 'a very mixed bag.' She thought some of the other girls seemed wealthy and she took some time to feel at home. She did make friends though and the camaraderie of dental nursing meant the girls usually formed strong bonds of friendship.

The Mansions however did provide a relatively quiet place in which to live and study and it was also solely for the use of school dental nurse trainees. Ten years earlier, when there were no dedicated hostels, Marjorie had had to find her own accommodation in a noisy boarding house in Macdonald Crescent. Marjorie recalled:

I had to go down at night to the public library and swot there. There'd be about half-a-dozen dental nurses sprinkled around and then we used to run home to Rosemere, you couldn't have swotted in Rosemere, the boarding house ... There were boys who drank there and there'd be gramophones going on and rows and things.

The Mansions Hostel in Ghuznee Street however got known around town in the early 1940s. The American Marines, then encamped at Central Park in Brooklyn, would visit in the hope of meeting New Zealand girls. Some girls 'snuck out', carefully descending conveniently located fire escapes, for clandestine meetings with Marines. The penalties for such behaviour could be severe. Young women

risked expulsion if they were caught meeting men to whom they were not related. Two girls Margaret knew got caught fire escaping, after having been out with Marines, and were fired on the spot. Margaret's training was strictly regimented and Physed lessons, complete with bloomers and tops, occurred weekly on the roof of the Willis Street Dental Clinic.

Margaret recorded her memories of her training as a School Dental Nurse, of her early years of dental nursing in Harihari and of her career as a Tutor Sister at the Willis Street Children's Dental Clinic in an oral history interview with Hugo Manson in 1985. Many other women have recorded their memories too. Today, the Dental Therapists' Association oral history archive held at the Alexander Turnbull Library is a fruitful source of historical information for dental therapists, historical researchers, and graduate oral health students.

Oral history has increased in popularity in recent years. The method of collecting spoken memories emerged forcibly in the 1970s in conjunction with women's movements around the world and the increasing interest in women's history. Oral history, to those who took a hold of it and refined it, seemed to be an especially effective way of recording the histories of those who had perhaps been 'forgotten' from the historical record. Respect for the subject, a collaborative effort between interviewee and interviewer and the subject 'speaking for themselves' all fulfilled emerging feminist criteria when oral history began to increase in popularity in the 1970s. Oral histories could capture

aspects of historical experience that tended to be missing, such as personal relations.

Oral history is narrative history. Essentially, an oral history interview is a set of stories told by the interviewee about their own lived experience. In the case of dental nurses, interviewees are likely to tell stories about their early lives, their training as a school dental nurse and their experiences as a new recruit 'in the field'. But because oral histories are narrative and tell stories, this also means that they can precisely explain the collective situation as well as offering a broader perspective on society. This is because an interviewee interprets meanings from their own perspective. In this way, oral histories are unlike any other historical sources because the narrator not only recalls the past but also asserts his or her interpretation of that past. Oral history is not simply about facts, but about meanings. Interviews can reveal unknown events or unknown aspects of known events or subject areas. It is the meanings, however, which are so interesting to those who use oral history as a source or to expand their perspective of a particular issue. One well-known Italian oral historian, Alessandro Portelli wrote of oral history that 'what is really important is that memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings' (Portelli, p. 69).

Recorded interviews from the New Zealand Dental Therapists' Association oral history project will be held in the Oral History Centre at the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. The Oral History Centre is New Zealand's principal oral history organisation and it holds the largest collection of recorded interviews in the country. Most of the oral history collection has been recorded since the 1970s and covers late nineteenth and twentieth century New Zealand social history, such as the Dental Therapists' Oral History Archive. Interviews held in the Centre range from structured life history interviews to theme-based interviews, such as those included in the dental therapists' collections, to more informal, conversational interviews. Other significant holdings include, for instance, rare recordings of 1930s political speeches. Access to the collections of the Oral History Centre is open to anyone subject to any conditions specified by interviewees or the organisation that has deposited the tapes. In the case of the New Zealand Dental Therapists' Association Oral History Archive, permission must be sought from the organisation before researchers can listen to interview recordings. Tapes are accompanied by abstracts, which chronicle the themes of the interview and the major areas of discussion. Abstracts mean that researchers can more easily access the recordings, and have an idea of what they are going to find when they listen to a recording, rather than spending large amounts of time on a recording that may not be of use to them. The tapes, and the abstracts, may be used within the Turnbull Library Oral History Centre or an interloan request may be made at most libraries throughout New Zealand. If you are going to use the tapes in the Oral History Centre, they must be requested 24

hours before you require them so that listening copies can be made of the original. The original interview tapes are housed in a cool room to preserve them for a long time. The most convenient method of interloaning tapes if you cannot get to the Oral History Centre is to directly ask a librarian at your local library. They will organise with the Turnbull Library to have the tapes you wish to listen to sent to your library and you can listen to them there.

The aim of the New Zealand Dental Therapists' Oral History Project is to record, as far as possible, individual memories of early dental nurse training, initial placements, a career in dental nursing, technical procedures and challenging and enjoyable experiences as a dental nurse or therapist. In the interviews that I have conducted so far, I have asked a broad range of questions of the interviewees. The interviews are theme-based, which means that, rather than a life history approach, particular aspects of the interviewees' lives are focussed upon. In this case, their career as a school dental nurse is the primary area of discussion. Aspects of their childhood and early education are also discussed. Biographical information is important in an oral history interview to add context to what the interviewee is saying and explain their decision to become a dental nurse. I then ask questions about their early training as a school dental nurse, accommodation, social life, discipline, home leave, hours of study and examinations. Technical aspects of the training are then discussed. First cavities cut, early equipment, training dummies, uniforms, clinic layout, supervision hierarchy, dental health education, patients, lining materials,

permanent extractions and treadle drills are all well-covered within the technical discussion. Graduation and early postings are then discussed. Travel, travelling equipment, the clinic, inspections by a dental officer, difficulties and challenges are also discussed. To conclude the interview, the interviewee and I discuss their later career, highlights and low points of a career as a school dental nurse, and trying to juggle dental nursing and family life.

Doctors and health professionals have, in the past, been those who have shown most interest in medical history. Today however, medical history is placed firmly within broader social history and projects, such as the Dental Therapists' Oral History Project, are important to preserve knowledge of health care in New Zealand during the twentieth century. Historians are increasingly placing the study of medical and health care history within the broader framework of political, social and economic influences. Medicine and health care are seen as a reflection of the society that structured them. Few historical studies have, however, been written on the school dental service. Insufficient sources can prove off-putting to those who wish to research a particular area of history and projects that record spoken memories become even more important to preserve the historical record before it is too late. As practising dental therapists and those who have a strong interest in dental therapy, you may know of women who might wish to be interviewed. I am happy to be contacted with the names of possible interviewees.

I have recently applied for extra funding for the oral history project from the New Zealand Lotteries Grants Board. The group to which I have applied is the Lottery Environment and Heritage committee who consider applications from organisations with a project that fosters the conservation, preservation and promotion of New Zealand's natural, physical and cultural heritage. The group have provided money for a number of oral history projects in the past, as these clearly fall within the ambit of preserving New Zealand's heritage. It will be some time before I hear back from the Lotteries Grants Board, but I am hopeful that they will consider the New Zealand Dental Therapists' Oral History Project worthy of funding. I am also realistic enough however to think that it may not happen and cannot be relied upon. The main expenses that the project incurs are: cassette tapes, the binding of abstracts, administrative costs, travel costs to and from interviewees' home towns, and some accommodation costs.

It is my aim that the New Zealand Dental Therapists' Oral History Project will begin to address the dearth of sources available for the study of the school dental service in New Zealand. Oral history can prove a very fruitful way of recording the histories of dental nurses and therapists and I hope that this new project will build upon the excellent material collected in the 1980s.

Editorial Note:

Emma is presently finishing her History Master's thesis in New Zealand gender history. She has completed a number of interviews with dental nurses, and is keen to hear from anyone who has other interviewees in mind. Contact details are: Ph 04 3892227

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