

SISTER ELIZABETH KENNY.

1880-1952.

The lady with the blessed hands

Elizabeth Kenny was born in Warialda in NSW and her father was a farmer who was known as a Bush Vet. In 1881 the family moved to a property on the Darling Downs in Queensland.

As a young girl, Elizabeth dreamed of becoming a Doctor but, at this time, it was an impossible dream. A local Doctor, Aeneas McDonald, employed her as an assistant and taught her about Bush Nursing.

Nurses, at this time, did not always have formal qualifications and Elizabeth never became a registered Nurse. Her subsequent problems with the Medical Profession stemmed from this.

Elizabeth never married. Her work was her life and always came first.

Elizabeth had the responsibility of caring for her widowed mother and she adopted a young girl, Mary Stewart, who would care for Mrs. Kenny when Elizabeth was away.

In 1901 the people on the Darling Downs had no Hospital and it was a long journey by horse drawn ambulance to reach Brisbane. In 1931 Elizabeth set up a small hospital at Clifton on the Darling Downs. It was here that she was called upon to treat a young girl, Amy McNeil, who had a fever and as this was not understood by Elizabeth she contacted a friend, Dr McDonald in Brisbane, who said that it could be Infantile Paralysis which was a rare disease that was infecting children and was impossible to treat.

Polio had arrived in Australia.

A few months earlier Elizabeth had treated her brother who had suffered a form of paralysis and had eased his pain by soaking strips of blanket in hot water and applying them to his legs as poultices. She decided to do the same for Amy and it relieved the pain and gave her some mobility. Amy's father was a stockman who lived in a bark hut and was unable to pay for the treatment but to Elizabeth this was unimportant and she never would have such patients turned away.

Soon, the Medical Profession was treating children by placing their legs in wooden splints and immobilizing the patients to avoid further damage to the muscles.

Elizabeth insisted that her patients discard their splints and strengthen their muscles by moving around and exercising. This did not endear her to the Doctors.

In 1915, Elizabeth joined the Australian Army Nursing Service and served with distinction aboard the Hospital Ships carrying the wounded soldiers back to Australia.

On board these cramped, overcrowded Ships she observed that the wounded men who had been able to get up and move around stood a much better chance of recovering the use of their legs than those who remained bedridden.

After the War, Elizabeth returned to her Hospital on the Darling Downs and she now treated her many Polio patients with warm baths and remedial exercises. She stressed the psychological importance of telling her young patients that their condition was curable.

Sister Kenny was strong-minded, authoritative and was a commanding figure in her Hospital. This may have been a good thing for a male Doctor but it was not seen as how a Nurse should behave.

Nurses were there to serve the needs of Doctors and be in awe of them. They were not there to contradict and advise on the treatment of patients.

Sister Kenny now made the mistake of saying that she could **CURE** patients of polio. This caused many Doctors to view her with great suspicion.

She would, later, say that she was able to **ALEVIATE THE SYMPTOMS OF THE DISEASE.**

Terrible epidemics of polio would occur in Australia in 1931-32 and in 1937-38. There was no vaccine at these times.

Farmers called it **COWS DISEASE** and said that it was spread from animals to humans. Everywhere she went Sister Kenny ran into fear and hysteria and saw many strange remedies being used. They included painting all fences with creosote to ward off any germs, hanging camphor blocks around children's necks and putting sulphur in their sox.

Sister Kenny was able to manage on a War Pension and a Royalty from the **SYLVIA STRETCHER** which she had invented. This was a cushioned, sprung stretcher which was popular for transporting patients over the rough country roads.

After years of crusading for children to discard their splints and refusing to allow them to be immobilized in the wards in metal cages, Sister Kenny set up a **Polio Treatment Clinic in Townsville**. Parents turned to her in desperation and brought their sick children to her rather than go to regular Doctors.

The Doctors were not amused.

They claimed that if they sent their patients to the Polio Clinic for hot baths and exercise treatment then Sister Kenny would take over the case and order that the patients be treated by her methods only.

The Queensland Government now decided to set up ***Kenny Clinics*** in other towns. There was, now, one in the grounds of the old Royal Brisbane Hospital.

In 1937 Sister Kenny wrote a book, ***Infantile Paralysis and Cerebral Diplegia***, which was published in Sydney. She claimed that the current methods of treating Polio were wrong and that her methods were the only correct ones.

Some Doctors were now saying that; she ***was an untrained charlatan***.

However, there were now many children who had been treated at her Clinics who were walking and were no longer bedridden. One of these boys was Johannes Bjelke-Petersen.

Dr. Aubrey Pie, the Medical Superintendent at Brisbane Hospital said that he was forced to recognize her success.

Other Doctors, working at the Brisbane Hospital. Made it a rule that Nurses working at the ***Kenny Clinic*** must not mix with Nurses at the Brisbane Hospital and that they must wear different uniforms.

In 1935 the Queensland Medical Establishment demanded that there be a Royal Commission to be headed by Sir Raphael Cilento to investigate ***Sister Kenny's Radical Treatment and its Outcome***.

While the Commission was writing its final report, Sister Kenny went to England where there was a huge Polio epidemic and she was treated with great respect by the British Medical Profession. She was asked to set up a Clinic in Surrey.

When she returned to Australia she was asked by the Victorian Government to set-up a Clinic in Melbourne as there was a severe polio epidemic in that State.

She was horrified to hear that the Queensland Royal Commission had damned her methods and was in favour of the old methods.

Despite these findings Sister Kenny was supported by the Public and she remained as dedicated as ever. She now received support from the Australian swimmer, Annette Kellerman who had returned from the USA and had been a polio victim.

There were now some Australian Doctors who recognized her work and six of them wrote a letter to the *Mayo Clinic* in the USA who invited her to come there as there was a polio outbreak in Minnesota.

Annette Kellerman and the Queensland Government paid her fares and she went to *The Minneapolis Medical School* where she was given a teaching position and the use of beds in their Teaching Hospital.

In 1942 the *Elizabeth Kenny Institute* opened in Minneapolis to give therapists training in her methods. *The National Polio Foundation* was formed and she was paid \$416 a month for life.

She was finally, financially secure and she purchased a house in Minneapolis and gave up her Australian Pension. She was showered with gifts of money which she gave to the Institute.

In 1952 there was another epidemic of Polio in the USA and a Gallup Poll showed that she was more popular than Eleanor Roosevelt.

Her methods were now widely accepted in the USA and more Clinics were opened and she would receive Honorary Degrees at several Universities. She became famous beyond her dreams.

In 1945 a film was made about her starring Rosalind Russell and she was invited to the White House to meet President Roosevelt who was a Polio survivor.

Sister Kenny refused to give up her Australian Citizenship so the US Congress passed a bill to enable her to travel anywhere she would in the World and to enter the USA without a Visa.

It was now being discovered that there would soon be a vaccine to cure polio but Sister Kenny was seen by the public that her method had saved their children.

At the end of her life Sister Kenny discovered that she had *Motor Neuron Disease* and for this there would be no cure. She now wanted to be back in Australia and be looked after by Mary Stewart, the girl that she had adopted in 1926.

Mary had cared for Elizabeth's mother until she died and she was now Mary McCracken and said that she would care for Elizabeth in her final years.

Sister Elizabeth Kenny died in Queensland in November 1952 aged 72 years. She is buried at Nobby on the Darling Downs.

Sister Kenny's prayers were answered when a Vaccine was developed by Jonas Salk and then another which was given with a few drops of a pink liquid on a lump of sugar.

Poli is now almost gone and is now only found in a few poor countries. Let us hope that it will go forever in our lifetime.

The Sister Kenny Institute is still there in Minneapolis and today is a Rehabilitation Center for Spinal Cord Injuries.

Today, Sister Kenny remains a legendary figure, especially in Queensland, as there are many people who still have friends and relatives who received treatment at one of *the Kenny Clinics*. A *Sister Kenny Memorial Museum* was opened in her memory and many people gave money to build it. One generous donation came from the USA from Alan Alda the star of *Mash* who was helped by Sister Kenny, herself, when he was a child suffering from Polio.

Sister Elizabeth Kenny was known to her many patients as;

The Lady with the Blessed Hands

She was always a controversial figure but she is a Wonderful Australian Woman in Australian History.

[John Imrie, 7/3/21]