

Losing leaves: The restoration of physiotherapy history in New Zealand

'Professor Johnston often said that if you didn't know history, you didn't know anything. You were a leaf that didn't know it was part of a tree' (Crichton, 2000, p. 70).

The years between 1894 and 1913 were remarkable times in the history of the western world. The second industrial revolution was well under way and Queen Victoria's empire continued to range over nearly one quarter of the globe. Marconi sent the first wireless message, Röntgen discovered X-rays, and Freud published his first work on psycho-analysis. The Boer War came and went, airplane flight became possible, and the Movement for Women's Suffrage became increasingly determined in its fight for equal rights for women. These years were also remarkable because they saw the organisation, training and registration of masseurs and masseuses into professional bodies that by the early 1930s would be known as physiotherapy.

Since 1994 each major professional group that has celebrated its centenary has published a commemorative text. The first was Jean Barclay's history of the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (Barclay, 1994). North America followed in 1995 with Wendy Murphy's history of the American Physical Therapy Association (Murphy, 1995), and just last year, the Australian Physiotherapy Association published its own history in Philip Bentley and David Dunstan's 'The Path to Professionalism' (Bentley & Dunstan, 2006).

These histories have been remarkable works of diligent scholarship; not least because physiotherapists are poor historians and keep shoddy records. A comprehensive history of the profession is therefore no mean feat and one that should not be entered into lightly. As we approach our centenary in 2013 we must consider what kind of commemoration we want, and take steps to prepare ourselves for the arduous task of formulating our profession's history. There are (at least) three questions that one must consider before planning a project of this sort:

Firstly, what materials are available? New Zealand's physiotherapy archives are in a poor state. Compared with the CSP's voluminous cache; stored and catalogued by the Wellcome Institute in London, our archives at the Hocken Library in Dunedin are modest to say the least. We have yet to locate any professional records predating 1925, and little more than official minutes to work with. The records of the Physiotherapy Board are procedural (you would hardly know from reading them that World War II had happened at all), those of the various Boards and Branches are incomplete, and the various hospital records are widely dispersed and disorganised.

Therefore, we know nothing of the personal histories of some of our founders and pioneers. Where, for instance, is the register of the first members of the New Zealand Trained Masseurs Association? Where are the personal recollections of Enid Gotts or M.L. Roberts? Where is the history of the discussions between Joan McGrath and the Department of Health in preparing for the drafting of the Physiotherapy Act (1949) that legislated our profession for the next 50 years? These may lie somewhere in New Zealand; boxed up in someone's roof, or secured in a vault in the Otago Medical School, or they may not exist at all. However, it is certain that the task of constructing our history, for the people who go looking for our profession's archives, will be an onerous one indeed.

Secondly, one must ask what kind of centenary do we want? Traditional histories of the profession have produced didactic texts that are often lavishly produced, descriptive, chronological interpretations of events. These histories have underplayed the subjective, social and constructive role played by everyday physiotherapists. Our own histories of physiotherapy in New Zealand are also of this sort. Enid Anderson's slim commemoration of our Golden Jubilee (Anderson, 1977), provides some useful information, but as a historical account it was very much 'of its time'; favouring events over emotions, descriptive accounts over personal experiences. The same may be said of Leah Taylor's history of the first 10 years of the Dunedin School (Taylor, 1988), and Jo Scrymgeour's more recent history of the profession in New Zealand (Scrymgeour, 2000). As commemorative texts they serve the purpose of bringing the details of events to the fore, but in doing so they present a rather two-dimensional narrative of what really ought to be a rich tapestry of a profession's emergence and growth.

Given this, our third question is 'what kind of history is possible?' In recent years, historians and philosophers of the social sciences have debated whether traditional histories are indeed dead; rendered pompous and patronising by a new breed of more egalitarian and inclusive studies. Much of this stems from the civil rights movements and anti-government rhetoric of the 1960s and 70s when minority groups began to assert their rights to have their own histories *** heard. So when Martin Luther King shouted from the banks of the Potomac River that 'History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamour of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people', it seemed that history itself was being challenged. Where, he asked, were the histories of the unheard?

New forms of history began to emerge with the realisation that everything that had been written

before was tainted by its own biases – biases that favoured the winners, the loudest, or the most affluent, and suppressed the indigenous, the marginal and minority voices. These 'hero histories' became the focus of much criticism and new interests in oral history, first hand accounts and subjective rigour began to take root. Thus we have seen a move towards 'local' knowledge as a replacement for the 'grand narratives' of old – the grand narratives that have been the quest of physiotherapy historians until now.

If we are to construct a history of our profession that is a dynamic, living 'text', from which generations of physiotherapists will be able to draw wisdom, we must debunk the idea that we have a common shared history, and move instead towards the notion of history as something that we all construct. Then we can move away from trying to write the singular account of our profession. To be able to do this, our task becomes one of locating texts (and here I include people's recollections, documents, photographs, and all other ephemera), organising them in some readily available format, and promoting the idea that history is as much about our present and future as it is about our past.

In my office I have a large manuscript from Auckland Hospital which is a record of every patient seen in the massage department between April 1947 and March 1949 – the very year we became recognised, in law, as physiotherapists. Over 5,000 patient visits are listed in that book; all hand-written, with name, address, age, referring doctor, condition (sometimes only 'back', 'sinusitis, or 'stiff finger' are provided), and details of appointments listed. I presume this book would have been used for hospital statistics because it contains no clinical information. I wonder about the 8 month old Baby Dennis Taylor of Kurahaupo Street in Orakei who was treated with short wave diathermy for an abscess (No. 4084), or Mr Chas Royston of Golf Road, Titirangi (aged 58), who was treated more than 34 times for a 'finger' (No. 3665)? I wonder whether we will ever know how he was treated, what the department looked like, who worked there, or why they did what they did? More importantly, I wonder if this wonderful text actually means anything? Does it matter? Who will care in the future? Is it worth keeping, or should I just throw it away?

The danger with this laissez-faire attitude towards our historical texts, is that we dispose of things that could have some importance in the future. I am not suggesting that we all become hoarders, far from it, rather that we have a regard for what we could lose if we don't organise our archives better. To illustrate my point, I would like to briefly relate a story to you.

A few months ago, I was talking with someone I met at the beach. During our conversation she asked me what I did. When I told her I was a physiotherapist she remarked that her mother,

now in her 80s, was herself an ex-physiotherapist (I think I remarked at the time that I didn't believe anyone ever became an 'ex-' physiotherapist). I gave her my phone number and a few weeks later her mother contacted me. Helen Cranwell graduated from Dunedin in 1944 and is one of our oldest surviving physiotherapists. No-one has ever asked her to recount her experiences of being a physiotherapist, or looked at the photographs and memorabilia she holds.

At our first meeting, Helen showed me the badge she had been given when she was a registered masseur, in the days before you could register as a physiotherapist. Sadly, the badge was stolen from her locker when she was in her 20s. She reapplied for a badge from the Physiotherapy Board, but the new oval design had replaced the original badge she had lost. 12 years ago however, when in her 70s, Helen received a call from a woman enquiring whether she was the same H. Cranwell who had owned a cobalt blue, enamelled, sterling silver badge with the year 1944, and her registration number, 736, stamped on the back. The woman's husband had found it on the beach with a metal detector, and kept it in a collection with other badges and coins, and on his death his wife had managed to trace the original owners.

Had I not met Helen's daughter on the beach and begun a conversation about physiotherapy, I might never have found Helen Cranwell and heard this amazing story, we might never have arranged to interview Helen and record her story for posterity, or seen one of the badges of our profession from a time when it wasn't even called physiotherapy.

Every day photographs, letters, certificates, records and other assorted bits of our history disappear into black plastic bags and are dumped into the refuse tip. Slowly, our profession's wise elders, its kaumatua, are dying and their experiences of their profession are dying with them. Departments close and move to new premises and their old archives disappear. And yet this is our history – being lost because people have lost interest, or simply don't know whether this material is important, or worst still, what to do with it.

So, from the start of 2007, the NZSP has commissioned a working group to begin the process of organising and documenting our history, and producing a resource for the whole profession. It is our intention to act as a repository, or at least a point of contact, for all the archive material that we will need when we celebrate our centenary.

Our first priority has been to begin capturing the stories from physiotherapists that have seen the profession grow from its humble beginnings, or have played a pivotal role in the professions development at home and abroad. Our plan is to collect oral histories from New Zealand physiotherapists, in high quality digital audio format, that will then be made available to us all. We will also begin gathering together, organising and archiving every available resource relating to the profession that

would otherwise disappear into the ether, and we will work towards a celebration of the profession in 2013 that befits the 100 years of hard work and dedication given to the profession by the hundreds of therapists that have gone before.

If you would like to make contact with anyone from the working group, if you have materials you would like to donate, or you know of someone you think should tell their story of the profession, contact us at the address below.

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