

Crown Street Women's Hospital

1893 – 1983

Other Names: • Women's Hospital, Crown Street

Details

Crown Street Women's Hospital was established in Hay Street in 1893 and moved to Surry Hills in 1897. It was a public women's and maternity hospital. In addition to being a general women's hospital, Crown Street accommodated many single mothers, including state wards and Aboriginal wards, and its staff arranged a high proportion of New South Wales adoptions. In 2011 and 2012 Crown Street Women's Hospital was the subject of close attention in the Senate inquiry that led to the *Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices* Report (2012). The Crown Street Women's Hospital was closed in 1983 and its facilities were transferred to hospitals in the outer suburbs of Sydney.

Founded by Dr James Graham in a four-roomed house in Hay Street in 1893, the Women's Hospital was funded by public subscription. A Board was formed in 1895 to run the hospital, although the government provided equipment and furniture. The Women's Hospital moved to Crown Street in Surry Hills in 1897. From 1897 Crown Street was a teaching hospital of the University of Sydney and by 1943 it had become the largest maternity hospital in New South Wales.

Crown Street aimed to lift medical standards for maternity care. In addition to providing wards for surgical cases and complicated births the Hospital provided treatment in homes, fertility treatments and outpatients services. By its Golden Jubilee in 1943 Crown Street Women's Hospital had become the largest maternity hospital in New South Wales claiming that "Crown Street never turns a patient away" (Museums of History NSW). The hospital accommodated women not only from Sydney, but from around NSW as well as from interstate and overseas. According to the hospital's centenary history, "Crown Street became a centre of learning, a centre of excellence, for thousands of midwives, medical and paramedical health professionals who took their skills to all corners of the earth" (Crown Street Centenary Committee, 1994). As Christine Cole has written, these public representations of the hospital's history differ markedly from the accounts of mothers whose babies were taken from them during the forced adoption era. She states that the hospital was "more like a 'baby farm' for infertile couples than a maternity hospital caring for the needs of Australia's most vulnerable citizens" (Supplementary submission, Submission 223).

According to Museums of History NSW, the Crown Street Hospital's Nurseries were divided into five categories – Main, D, Premature, Adoption, and Founders Isolation. The term 'adoption babies' was used for all babies awaiting adoption, foster care or other Child Welfare Department arrangement. Many single mothers, including state wards and Aboriginal girls who were in the wardship of the Aborigines Protection and Welfare Boards, came to Crown Street. The Hospital developed a major adoption service, arranging a high proportion of adoptions in the state of New South Wales.

Single pregnant women were treated differently from other mothers at Crown Street. Single mothers' patient records were marked with acronyms, such as UB- (unmarried, not keeping baby) or BFA (baby for adoption). A social worker at Crown Street, interviewed for the Four Corners program recalled the processes for single mothers: "Well the practice, the general practice was that the baby would be whisked away to the nursery. Ah, it would be labelled, you know, BFA – baby for adoption" (Given or taken? Four Corners, 2012).

Four Corners discussed how surviving medical records from Crown Street and other public hospitals show consistency in the drugs administered to single mothers. “Immediately after giving birth – and days before consent to adoption was given – they were routinely administered anti-lactation drugs to dry up their milk.” Women were also given high doses of barbiturate sedatives (Given or taken? 2012)

In a submission to the NSW government inquiry into adoption practices, Dian Wellfare describes her interactions with staff at Crown Street Hospital, as an unmarried mother in the late 1960s. She remembers having to meet with hospital almoners (social workers) to discuss her plans for her baby before seeing a doctor. She describes the social worker discouraging her when she expressed her desire to keep her baby, and not being advised of any of the available supports for single mothers. She writes in her submission:

We never talked about adoption. She never even discussed what adoption actually meant or that it was permanent and final. I was never told about a thirty day revocation period ... After having been denied my legal right to make a free choice, forbidden to see or bond with my own baby, transported to another hospital while my baby was hidden from me back at Crown Street, kept conveniently sedated and traumatised during my post confinement period, the Hospital Almoner had the audacity to write on my discharge summary: The mother is tearful about adoption but feels she is doing the right thing. She realises she is not in a position keep the baby” (Wellfare, 1995).

A submission by an adopted person to the Commonwealth inquiry stated that her adoption from Crown Street was a “private” one, arranged by hospital staff. She writes that the hospital social worker was a close friend of her adoptive family (and became the woman’s godmother), and that her adoptive parents, aged in their early 40s, were too old to adopt a child through official channels (Margaret Watson, submission 98).

An obstetrician recalled seeing babies “repeatedly” removed from their teenage mothers when he was a medical student at Crown Street Hospital. He described the use of a “crude wooden restraint board” to keep mothers from seeing their babies – “This board had a hole in the middle that went across the girl’s chest, with a nurse either side holding the girl down” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 February 2012). Other sources refer to a pillow or a sheet being placed on the chest of the mother, so as to obscure her view of her baby (Senate, pp.47-48).

The Senate report states that some mothers whose babies were born at Crown Street were told that their babies had died, when in fact the child had been taken for a “rapid adoption” process (Senate, p.66). Rapid adoption was a process for married women whose babies were stillborn, allowing them to “replace” their dead infant with an adopted baby. Cole states that informing single mothers that their infants had died was a “well entrenched practice” at Crown Street by the 1940s, supposedly for the women’s best interests as their babies were being adopted. She also writes that single mothers were accommodated in the basement of the hospital, and kept away from the married women.

Crown Street had two annexes for pregnant and post-natal women. Canonbury, on the Darling Point waterfront, opened in 1947. A newspaper article stated that this new annexe would allow for 1000 more babies to be born at the hospital each year. Canonbury was described as being for women “who had done reasonably well” during birth. A submission to the Senate’s inquiry into forced adoptions states that single mothers were sent from Crown Street to Canonbury, and that Canonbury was specifically for single mothers who were keeping their babies (submission 399, p.39).

The other annexe was Wakehurst, a 36 bed facility which opened in 1952 in the Lady Wakehurst Home, in Birrell Street, Waverley. Christine Cole cites an affidavit by a former social worker at Crown Street that states that single mothers were sent to Wakehurst after their babies were born. This meant that they had no physical means of seeing their babies (Submission 223). The story of one woman in *Releasing the Past* (2008) indicates that Wakehurst functioned as a maternity home, and accommodated pregnant women before they gave birth. “I was one of 12 girls on the ward. We were referred to as the ‘antenatals’ and a girl asked one day what it meant. She somehow thought it meant ‘anti’ and the ‘natal’ part she couldn’t comprehend at all! The days were long, as we had nothing to do except make our beds. We had to be in bed at 7 pm for visitors, who seldom came”. She writes that, “When all was said and done, I had been institutionalised by this time having been in Wakehurst for three

months" (Mary Walsh, in *Releasing the past*, Submission 223, Attachment 1, p.108).

The Crown Street Women's Hospital was closed on 31 March 1983 and its facilities were transferred to hospitals in the outer suburbs of Sydney. The building was redeveloped as office space. Its records were sent to the Royal Hospital for Women and are now located at Prince of Wales Hospital.

Gallery



Crown Street Women's Hospital

Description: Crown Street Women's Hospital, from the corner of Albion and Crown Street, Surry Hills. This photo is undated, the date included is an estimate. Reproduced by Judith Godden, Inside History Blog

<http://insidehistorymagazine.blogspot.com.au/2011/08/sydneys-crown-street-hospital.html>

More info

Related Entries

Run by

- [Health Department, State Government of New South Wales \(1982 - current\)](#)
Date: 1982 - 1983
- [Department of Public Health, State Government of New South Wales \(1938 - 1973\)](#)
- [Office of the Director-General of Public Health \(1913 - 1938\)](#)
- [Department of Charitable Institutions \(1888 - 1911\)](#)
- [Metropolitan Hospitals and Charities Department, State Government of New South Wales \(1911 - 1913\)](#)
- [Health Commission, State Government of New South Wales \(1973 - 1982\)](#)
Date: 1973 - 1982

Related Events

- [Inquiry into Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices, Commonwealth of Australia \(2011 - 2012\)](#)
Crown Street Women's Hospital was mentioned in submissions 15, 42, 72, 74, 77, 98, 106, 117 and 123 to the Inquiry Committee as an institution that was involved in forced adoption.

Related Organisations

- [Parramatta Girls Training School \(1946 - 1974\)](#)
Girls who were pregnant while they were in Parramatta Girls Training School were transferred to Myee and gave birth at Crown Street Women's Hospital before returning to Myee and Parramatta
- [Hospitals Commission of New South Wales \(1929 - 1973\)](#)
- [Myee \(1926 - 1977\)](#)
Pregnant women who were living at Myee were sent to Crown Street Women's Hospital to give birth
- [Tresillian Mothercraft Homes, Royal Society for the Welfare of Mothers and Babies \(1918 - current\)](#)
Social workers from Crown Street sent some unmarried mothers to live at Tresillian homes in the 1950s and 1960s. Tresillian cared for babies waiting for adoption.
- [Tresillian Vaucluse \(c. 1935 - October 1968\)](#)
Crown Street Women's Hospital referred unmarried mothers for jobs as domestics at Tresillian Vaucluse.

Resources

- [Catholic Women's Association: Hospital Visitors' Activities](#), The Catholic Press, 10 September 1936

- [Don't forget](#), Australian Women's Weekly, 7 November 1936

Records

For more information and to access your records, follow the links below:

Records

- [Birth registers, Crown Street Women's Hospital \(1 July 1953 - 1983\)](#)
 - [Medical records, Crown Street Women's Hospital \(1950 - 1983\)](#)
 - [Confinement books, Crown Street Women's Hospital \(1904 - 1933\)](#)
 - [Admission books, Crown Street Women's Hospital \(1916 - 1983\)](#)
 - [Labour ward registers, Crown Street Women's Hospital \(1 November 1943 - March 1983\)](#)
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