

St Margaret's Home for Unwed Mothers

1894 – 1998

Other Names:

- St Margaret's Maternity Home
- St Margaret's Hospital for Women
- St Margaret's Hospital

Details

St Margaret's Hospital was established in Strawberry Hills [Surry Hills] in 1894 as a lying-in home, by a religious community led by Gertrude Abbott. It grew and became a maternity hospital, lying in home and provided midwifery nursing training. In 1910, St Margaret's moved to Darlinghurst. From 1937 was run by the Sisters of St Joseph. St Margaret's was an adoption agency and an obstetric teaching hospital for the University of Sydney. St Margaret's Public Hospital operated as part of the hospital from 1946-1993 and St Margaret's Children's Hospital operated from 1967-1979. St Margaret's closed in 1998.

St Margaret's Hospital was started in 1894 by a group of women living in an informal Catholic religious community in 'Lorraine Terrace', 561 Elizabeth Street, Strawberry Hills (Surry Hills), on the corner of Cleveland Street. The leader of this community was Gertrude Abbott, who had been a Josephite nun in Adelaide (formerly Mary Jane O'Brien, then Sister Ignatius of Jesus). Gertrude Abbott remained in charge of the hospital until 1932.

Cardinal Moran sanctioned Abbott's work on 19 March 1894 and she and her companions were able to establish a refuge for unmarried pregnant women, and to provide obstetric care and hospital attention to poor married mothers and those with illnesses. Magdalen Foley, one of women of the community and a former Queensland Josephite, started the Midwifery Training School in 1894.

Babies were housed in a foundling centre in Bligh Street Newtown, until the Sisters of Mercy established the [Waitara Home for Foundlings](#). By 1898 the hospital had expanded to occupy four terraces and was running an Outdoor Department to treat the sick poor from the local area, in their own homes. A District Nursing Branch and dispensary was established in Cleveland Street, nearby. By 1906 the institution was known as St Margaret's Hospital for Women, and 'Mother' Abbott was matron.

In 1910 the community leased a former school (the Jesuit St Aloysius College and Sacred Heart) at 435 Bourke Street, Darlinghurst. Later purchased, this site became the permanent home of the Hospital.

An article about St Margaret's from 1913 described the activities of the hospital:

St Margaret's is conducted on entirely non-sectarian lines ... No applicant is refused admission ...

As well as unmarried women who are unable to contribute to their maintenance, the maternity department receives married women whose circumstances do not permit of paying for necessary medical treatment and nursing, but whose means enable them to contribute a small amount towards their care whilst in the hospital. Separate wards are available for these patients.

Where the exigency of the case demands it, unmarried patients are admitted some weeks before they become mother. Occupation is found for them in assisting the household and laundry work connected with the institution; and it is beautiful to reflect that in a great many cases under the gentle and encouraging influence and efforts of the noble souls in authority, these young women leave the hospital strengthened to live a happier and better life in the future (The Catholic Press, 17 July 1913).

Gertrude Abbott died in 1934, but she had wanted the hospital to remain under Catholic control. Archbishop Kelly asked the Sisters of St. Joseph to take over St. Margaret's, which they did in 1937. This was the first time an Australian religious order had staffed and managed a hospital. The Sisters asked Sisters Livinus and Anne Byrne of [St Joseph's Babies Home](#) in Broadmeadows, Victoria, to take over the administration and nursing of the hospital.

After World War II the site was continually extended and rebuilt and specialist services and training courses added, including obstetric and gynaecology training of doctors. St. Margaret's Private Hospital was opened in 1946 to assist in the funding of the public facilities. The large hospital block on the corner of Albion Street was opened in 1951. In 1964 the hospital became an obstetrics teaching hospital for the University of Sydney, which it remained until 1988.

St Margaret's Home for Unwed Mothers was mentioned in the *Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices* Report (2012) as an institution that was involved in forced adoption. Kate Howarth, author of the memoir *Ten Hail Marys* (2010), gave evidence to the Committee and made a submission with details of her experiences as a single mother in the 1960s.

In 1965, I was an unmarried, pregnant, 15 year old girl and taken to St. Margaret's Home for unmarried mothers in Darlinghurst Sydney. At the time of admission I was presented with a document to give consent to adopt my child and told to sign it. I refused to sign. At no time before this document was presented was I advised of any alternative to adoption. Nor was I advised of the financial, and other material support, which I now know was available at that time, and which the laws of the day dictated was my entitlement to know, prior to any document for adoption being prepared.

For the next four months I was put to work in the hospital kitchen and laundry, for six and a half days a week, working an eight hour split shift. There was no payment for the work I did; it was said to cover my 'keep' while I was confined and awaiting the birth of my child. The accommodation provided by the hospital was overcrowded and squalid. The food supplied was inadequate for the needs of a pregnant girl and resulted in malnutrition that resulted in considerable hair loss and dental problems due to a lack of calcium in the diet.

The treatment I was subjected to while the hospital administrator (Sister [redacted]) attempted to get my consent for adoption was tantamount to torture and included threats, intimidation and sleep deprivation (Submission 235).

St. Margaret's Children's Hospital was built in 1967, following fundraising by Sister Anne Byrne, who had become matron of the entire hospital. It operated from 1967 to 1982 for the specialist care of infants and children, particularly the intensive care needs of neonates. St. Margaret's Public Hospital closed in June 1993, followed by the closure of the Private Hospital in June 1998. The Children's Hospital is now the Gertrude Abbott Nursing Home and the rest of the site has been converted into apartments.

When St Margaret's Public Hospital closed in 1993 its records were moved to the Royal Hospital for Women in Paddington and are now under the control of Prince of Wales Hospital.

Some of the records of St Margaret's Public Hospital are lodged in the Manuscripts Collection of the Mitchell Library. Written permission is required from the Sisters of St Joseph before access can be arranged.

St Margaret's Hospital was mentioned in the *Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices* Report (2012) as an institution that was involved in forced adoption. The section of St Margaret's Hospital for single mothers, known as the lying-in section, was [St Margaret's Home for Unwed Mothers](#).

Gallery



New St Margaret's Hospital Block, opened 1951

Description: This is a digital copy of an image reproduced in K.E. Burford's *Unfurrowed Fields*.



Darlinghurst - St. Margaret's Women's Hospital (New South Wales)

Description: This is a copy of a page of a photographic album held in the Public Record Office Victoria series Photos and Negatives of Government Buildings.

More info

Related Entries

Run by

- [Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart \(1866 - current\)](#)

Related Events

- [Inquiry into Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices, Commonwealth of Australia \(2011 - 2012\)](#)

St Margaret's Hospital was mentioned in submission 235 to the *Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices* Senate inquiry as an institution that was involved in forced adoption.

Related Organisations

- [St Anthony's Home Croydon \(1925 - 1980\)](#)

When women were ready to leave St Margaret's, they could go to St Anthony's with their babies for a period of 12 months

Resources

- Senate Community Affairs References Committee, [Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices](#), 29 February 2012

Records

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

Records

- [St. Margaret's Hospital \(Darlinghurst, N.S.W.\) Records 1894-1998 \(1894 - 1998\)](#)
 - [Birth registers, St Margaret's Hospital, Darlinghurst \(Public Section\) \(1948 - 1993\)](#)
 - [Medical records, St Margaret's Hospital, Darlinghurst \(Public Section\) \(1960 - June 1993\)](#)
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