

# The Life of Constance Stone - Australia's First Woman Doctor

4.12.1856 to 9.12.1902

by Wendy Macdonald, MBBS

I consider it a privilege to give this inaugural Constance Stone Memorial Lecture and it seems only fitting that the subject should be the life of Constance herself.

In 1854 a young English couple migrated to Hobart. William Stone was an organ maker by trade and his wife Betsy had worked as a governess in England. At that time Australia was in the grip of the gold rush and people were flooding on to the gold fields of Victoria from all over the world, however the Stones had not come to look for gold or they would have gone to Victoria and not Tasmania. At that time the ability to sing and play a musical instrument was part of the social equipment of every young lady and organ building would have been at the

top end of the business of providing musical instruments for churches and homes.

The Stones had six children, four boys and two girls. The first child, Constance, was born shortly before Christmas in 1856, next came a boy, William, then another daughter Clara, then three more boys. The family lived in Hobart for eighteen years and when the children were teenagers the family decided to move to Melbourne. At the time, thanks to the effects of the gold rush, Melbourne was marvelous Melbourne, the most exciting city in Australia. It was about to be engulfed by an enormous boom in property, railways and buildings of all kinds.

William Stone set up his workshop in Patterson Street, Saint Kilda which was then a pleasant seaside suburb. The family home was in what is now Middle Park. William, the eldest boy went into

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his father's business for a time, and then made a name for himself working in the railways and in electric power, and later in the new field of X-ray technology.

Constance followed her mother's example and taught school in the Stone's home while she and Clara attended art classes at the National Gallery school.

In 1882 when Constance was 26 she met a young Welsh clergyman who had emigrated to Australia for his health. On his arrival, he obtained a post at the Collins Street Independent Church. David Egryn Jones was a fiery preacher and it was through this that he met the Stone family. At this time, perhaps for reasons connected with his own health, Egryn Jones decided that it would be a good thing if he could minister to the bodies as well as the souls of his congregation and he decided to study medicine. Constance Stone decided to study medicine too.

We do not know just how she first evolved this astonishing idea. Perhaps it had been developing for some time although there was nothing in her family background to suggest it and at the time it was a most outlandish, almost an offensive ambition for a young woman.

Victorian prudery was at its height. Bulls were referred to as gentlemen cows and pianos had their legs covered.

Knowledge of her own anatomy was considered almost shocking for a young woman. Perhaps Egryn Jones' decision fired Constance, but whatever the cause she made the choice and prepared to follow it through.

For Egryn Jones to study medicine was relatively easy.

Melbourne

University was

founded in 1853

and its medical

school opened in

1863. Egryn Jones

could study there.

The university was open to women too.

In 1879 women students were admitted to matriculation and to all courses - but medicine.

Constance therefore had to go abroad to study and in 1884 she left Australia for America and enrolled in the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania. This institution had been founded in 1850 and was the first medical school for women in the English-speaking world. The following year David Egryn Jones came to Philadelphia also. In 1887 Constance graduated. For a time after that she worked in a New York hospital and she then went to Toronto because Canada could provide her with a British



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qualification, whereas an American qualification might not be accepted in Australia.

In Toronto she graduated MD CM with first class honours. David Egryn Jones, who had also come to Toronto for the same reason, qualified in the same year. Constance then went to London and in 1888 she became a licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries which was the only British qualification open to women at the time. The dates concerned seem rather close together but I assume that as a graduate Constance may have been able to sit her examination without having to do the full course of lectures.

The Society of Apothecaries was an interesting body. It had descended from the grocers in much the same way as the surgeons have descended from the barbers and occupied a position half way between druggists or dispensing chemists and physicians. In 1868 it was described as 'an inferior branch of the medical profession' but its members were legally entitled to attend the sick, diagnose and prescribe for them and to compound and administer medicines. They were not however, allowed to charge for both services but only for either the medicine or the attendance.

In London Constance worked at the New London Hospital for Women which had been founded about seventeen years earlier by Dr. Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, an English pioneer woman doctor. This was an institution for women and was staffed entirely by women. It had out-grown its original site and needed larger buildings. Constance

would have been aware of all the discussions and decisions which this involved.

In 1889 Constance left England and returned to Australia and in February 1890 she became the first woman to be registered as a medical practitioner in this country. She was written up by the magazine *Table Talk*, which gave her a most favourable press. It described her as being of medium height with a trim figure, dark hair and eyes. She was later described as an efficient practitioner and ultra-conservative in her views. Presumably this meant medical views because it is impossible to see how a woman with her ideas could be described as ultra-conservative. Her ideas on education and women's suffrage were progressive to the point of radicalism.

While Constance was away the walls of Melbourne University had been breached and her younger sister Clara and six other women were studying medicine. Clara and Margaret Whyte graduated in 1891 and in that year also David Egryn Jones, now a member of the College of Surgeons, returned to Australia.

In the five years that Constance had been away conditions in Melbourne had changed dramatically. Not only were women admitted to medicine but the land boom had burst. Banks and companies had gone broke. Property values had collapsed. Bankrupt financiers were nearly as common as they are now. Thousands were out of work and there were no social services to provide for them.

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Constance began practice in Collins Street and she and her sister Clara also went to work at the Free Medical Mission in Collingwood, a charitable service run by an Irishman, Dr. John Singleton. Constance also became an honorary medical officer at a girls home. Medicine was not her only interest. Her struggles to qualify and the difficulty she had found in being accepted made her a firm advocate of improved education and votes for women, both of which were hot topics at the time.

In 1892 Constance and David Egryn Jones became engaged and in 1893 they married. David Jones was appointed pastor of the Welsh church in Latrobe Street, a position which he held for many years.

At first the couple lived in [179] **Gipps Street East Melbourne** and they shared professional rooms in Collins Street. About 18 months after her marriage, on March 22, 1895 Constance invited Victoria's new women doctors to a meeting at her home. She realized that the women doctors needed to support each other if they were to make headway against the wall of male resistance. At this meeting they formed themselves into a society for the purpose of mutual professional support. This was the first meeting of the Medical Women's Society and Constance was its first president.

In the meantime Dr. Singleton had died and the clinic at Collingwood was carried on by his three sons none of whom was medically trained. Constance and Clara did not like the change of management and resigned, but

continued to provide a similar service one day a week at St. David's Hall behind the Welsh Church.

On Sept 5, 1896 the Medical Women's Society met again. They all knew from bitter experience that it was not enough to qualify. Women might, like Margaret Whyte, have done brilliantly, or be at the top of the list like the Greig sisters, but they could not get jobs. What to do? Should they continue to fight the hospitals and try to establish themselves there, or should they follow the English model and set up a facility for themselves. After a great deal of anxious discussion they chose to go out on their own. They had no money and no general acceptance. But they were motivated by that splendid Australian principle, 'Have a go!'

David Egryn Jones persuaded the Welsh Church to let them use St. David's Hall three days a week and there they opened the outpatient department of the grandly named Victoria Hospital. This name was chosen, not in honour of Queen Victoria but because it was intended to serve the whole state.

The Society of Apothecaries must have been proud of its licentiate because she certainly needed all her dispensing skills. At the Victoria Hospital there were no toilets and no taps. The women doctors made up all the medicines they prescribed and washed the bottles too. There were no inpatient beds. Cash flow consisted of patient contributions which were dropped into a saucer on a table. The venture was a rousing success. Women and children flocked to the new

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clinic. Here at last were kindly well-educated members of their own sex who were ready, willing and able to help them.

In 1897 Queen Victoria had been on the throne for 60 years and great celebrations were in train for her golden jubilee. The women doctors felt confident enough to go ahead with the next step of their plan. They began to raise money to buy an empty building, formerly the Governesses Institute. A committee of helpers and fund-raisers was appointed, headed by Mrs. Annette Bear-Crawford. Coles Book Arcade, of Coles Funny Picture Book fame, agreed to act as campaign headquarters and the Queens Shilling Fund was launched. Every woman in Victoria was asked to contribute a shilling towards what was now to be called the Queen Victoria Hospital.

The fund soon raised £3,000. The Governesses Institute was bought and renovated. It had eight in-patient beds, an operating theatre and Melbourne's first ante-natal clinic. Melbourne's other hospitals, the Melbourne, the Alfred and the Homeopathic (later Prince Henry's) must have shivered in their shoes. As all the women doctors were young and relatively inexperienced, a panel of male consultants was set up to advise on difficult situations.

In July 1899 the Queen Victoria Hospital was opened with much fanfare by Lady Brassey, the wife of the then governor, and one week later Constance gave birth to a daughter. Two years later, in 1901, another of her ambitions was

realized. Women achieved the vote. The progress of the new hospital exceeded all expectations but Constance had contracted tuberculosis and her health failed rapidly. In December 1902 she died, just a month after her 46<sup>th</sup> birthday.

William Stone and Betsy, David Egryn Jones and Constance are buried beside each other in Kew cemetery. There is a handsome polished granite monument to Constance the inscription of which reads:

*The Pioneer Woman Physician of Australasia  
A Gentle Wife And Mother  
A Skilful And Beloved Physician  
Servant Of God. Well Done.*

Constance's daughter Bronwen was left motherless, but David Jones married again, a lady named Charlotte. In 1923 Bronwen graduated MBBS and in 1928 she was a member of the staff of the Queen Victoria Hospital. In 1935 she went to England where she married and practised medicine in Cambridgeshire. Mr. Evan Hughes, my informant, met Bronwen when she was a teenager and greatly admired her long, auburn hair, which seems to have been a family trait. David Jones liked fishing and shooting and made trips to Tasmania. There he met his third wife, a lady called Westaway. Clara Stone, Constance's sister, did not marry and lived into her nineties.

**Text of the speech made to the Victorian Medical Women's Society on the occasion of its centenary.**

**Photograph of Constance Stone courtesy of Delwyn Freestone.**

