



Nurses' Memoirs as Windows to Epidemic Histories: the example of Hansen's disease and Indigenous Australians in mid twentieth-century Northern Territory

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Isolation measures introduced to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic in the early 2020s seemed like vestiges from the dark past, not seen since the 'Spanish Flu' a century ago. But they were well within the memories of Indigenous people who had been Hansen's disease patients decades earlier, and for whom 'iso' meant not a few weeks confined to home or a hotel, but years in an institution. This talk explores healthcare by nurses, as frontline workers in Northern Territory Indigenous settlements and institutions in the 1950s and 1960s, in attempting changes to Hansen's management. In line with the theme of this conference, their approach represented a 'second opinion', due to a reevaluation of policy after past failures and with the benefit of more effective treatments. As with the current pandemic, Indigenous people resisted isolation measures, but their concern was to keep their families together, rather than lose individuals, particularly children, to the Darwin leprosarium. This was the challenge for two registered nurses whose memoirs inform this talk: Ellen Kettle, a single white woman and government employee, who published her memories in 1967, and Marion Whelan, a missionary sister and leprosarium matron who recorded her memories several decades later, and with whom Ellen crossed paths professionally. I will argue that under the assimilation policy, the female gender, together with the women's nursing skills enhanced by medical advances, was integral to the aim of replacing the coercive, police-based Hansen's campaign with one based on encouragement and education, directed particularly towards Indigenous women. While these newer interventions may have helped individuals, they did not end the suffering and violation of Hansen's patients' rights.

Nurses' memoirs have been useful for scholars researching various arenas of healthcare of the past, as shown by nursing historian Christine Hallett in her discussion of texts by World War I nurses. She sees their value as sources because nurses' work is the "work of healing or caring for individuals" [Hallett: 328], whereas medical historians have focused on medical innovations. Hallett's research shows that, regardless of intentions, nurses' memoirs inadvertently leave crucial evidence of their pasts that are relevant to historians' research projects [Hallett: 321]. For example, nursing scholar Sue Forsyth's article analysed stories by non-Indigenous nurses of their encounters with Indigenous patients, and found widespread institutionalised racism which impinged on the quality or availability of healthcare [Forsyth: 43]. Sisters Kettle and Marion may have intended their texts to show the benefits of modern medicine brought to the bush, but they also elucidated the continuing health crises of Indigenous communities and the limitations on state-sponsored medical interventions.

References

- Christine E. Hallett (2007). 'The Personal Writings of First World War Nurses: a study of the interplay of authorial intention and scholarly interpretation', *Nursing Inquiry* 14 (4), 320-329.
- Sue Forsyth (2007). 'Telling stories: Nurses, politics and Aboriginal Australians, circa 1900-1980s', *Contemporary Nurse*, 24:1, 33-44.