

AUSTRALIAN WOMEN FACT FILE

AGNES ELIZABETH LLOYD BENNETT

(1872 – 1960)

Pioneer Doctor and Feminist

1872	24 June born at Neutral Bay, Sydney
1878 - 1881	Educated first at Cheltenham Ladies College and Dulwich Girls High School in England
1885 - 1889	Abbotsleigh Girls School, Sydney
1887 – 1889	Sydney Girls High School
1890 – 1894	Studied science at University of Sydney
1895 – 1899	Studied at the College of Medicine for Women, University of Edinburgh, Scotland (MB, ChM)
1901	Set up private practice in Sydney; failed due to prejudice
1904	Junior medical officer at the Hospital for the Insane, Callan Park, Sydney
1905	Bought medical practice in Wellington, New Zealand
1908 – 1936	Medical Superintendent, St Helen's Maternity Hospital NZ
1910	Honorary Physician, Children's Ward, Wellington Hospital NZ
1911	Obtained degree of Doctor of Medicine (MD) in Edinburgh
1915	First female commissioned officer in the British Army
1916 – 1917	In charge of a Unit of the Scottish Women's Hospitals on the Serbian front
	Awarded the Order of St Sava, Serbia's highest award
1939	Formed Women's War Service Auxiliary in New Zealand
1940 – 1942	Worked in England for the war effort
1948	Awarded the OBE
1960	27 November died in Wellington, New Zealand

Agnes Elizabeth Lloyd Bennett was the sixth of seven children of William Christopher Bennett, engineer, who became Commissioner of Roads for NSW, and his first wife Agnes Amelia (Hays). Her mother was the daughter of an Englishman who had emigrated to New York and married an American. When Agnes was only five and a half, her mother took all the children to England to be educated at 'modern' schools. Tragically, Mrs Bennett died of smallpox in 1881, and highly intelligent, strong-willed nine year-old Agnes was devastated. William Bennett brought his children back to Sydney, where he subsequently re-married, an unhappy time for Agnes. When she was fifteen, her father died of a heart attack.

To save money, Sarah, her stepmother, transferred Agnes from Abbotsleigh to Sydney Girls High School which was in the building now occupied by David Jones on Elizabeth Street. Two of her classmates were Louise Mack (refer Fact Sheet) and Ethel Turner (who wrote the classic *Seven Little Australians*). When Agnes had completed her schooling, her stepmother felt she should stop costing the family money and *she would do well to marry*. However, she won a State Scholarship to study Arts (the only faculty that admitted women) at Sydney University, where she studied science subjects and, in 1894, graduated BSc with Honours in Geology and Biology, the first woman to graduate with honours in Science at Sydney University.

However, a career in science was not to be, as male employers did not want women. To support herself, Agnes took a position as a governess in outback NSW for three years, during which time she determined to study medicine so that she could remain in the world of science. She also determined to train at Edinburgh University, where the Medical College for Women had been established by Dr Elsie Inglis to enable women to acquire the practical knowledge they needed to pass their exams. Conditions for women to study medicine at Sydney University were very poor, the Edinburgh degree was a much better one to have, and several Australian girls were already studying there. Agnes was full of enthusiasm and applied to her late father's bank manager for a loan. The loan was granted with low interest, but Agnes was warned that it was only until she graduated and that she would have to live very frugally in Edinburgh.

After she had graduated MB,ChM in 1899, she was refused permission to sit for the qualifying exams for the Royal College of Surgeons, and when she was selected for the position of Resident Medical Officer at the prestigious Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, the Board of Governors refused to appoint her-because she was a woman. She was accepted as RMO at the Larbert Mental Hospital near Edinburgh and on her return to Sydney in 1901, after failing to establish a private practice because of prejudice against women doctors, the only opening she could find was at Callan Park Hospital for the Insane.

Realising that prejudice and antagonism still prevented acceptance of women doctors in NSW, she bought a medical practice in Wellington, New Zealand in 1905. In 1908 she was appointed to St Helen's Maternity Hospital, Wellington, the first State maternity hospital in the world, where she remained Medical Superintendent until 1936. From 1910 she was Honorary Physician to the children's ward at the Wellington Public Hospital. During this time Agnes publicly opposed the Karitane child health specialist, Dr Truby King, who saw *higher education as detrimental to women's maternal functions and hence to the human race*.

When World War I broke out the Army refused Agnes' services as a doctor, so she sailed for Europe in 1915 intending to join the French Croix Rouge. Breaking her journey in Cairo, she met the Director of NZ Medical Services (a friend) who immediately offered her a job. She accepted and was sworn in as an Army Captain, the first female commissioned officer in the British Army. After the safe evacuation of Gallipoli so that the hospitals no longer needed her, she was granted a discharge and made her way to London where she joined Dr Elsie Inglis' Scottish Women's Field Hospitals. The War Office had refused to use women doctors, so field hospitals, staffed entirely by women, were set up to work in Allied countries such as Serbia, Belgium, and Rumania. During 1916-1917, Dr Bennett was Commanding Officer of a field hospital on the Serbian front, working under extreme war conditions, where, not being under the control of the British Army, they were able to administer to civilians as well. Forced to resign because of malaria, she was awarded the Order of St Sava 3rd class and the Cross of Honour of the Serbian Red Cross by Crown Prince Alexander. His aide de camp, Captain Milan Yovitchitch (refer Fact File Olive King) made the presentation. In 1917-1918 she worked as medical officer on the troopship *Wiltshire*, the cargo ship *Essex*, at the Royal Infirmary in Glasgow and at an army hospital near Southampton, and finally sailed home on the troopship *Paparoa*.

Agnes returned to Wellington after the war and resumed her medical practice and her work at St Helen's Maternity Hospital. She sold her practice in 1930 and retired as Medical Superintendent of the St Helen's Hospitals in 1936.

In 1938-39, she spent a year working with the Flying Doctor Service based at Burketown in Northern Queensland. During World War II, she initiated the formation of the Women's War Service Auxiliary in New Zealand (Cabinet would not countenance a Women's Army similar to that in England); worked with the Women's Voluntary Services in the London East End and in an evacuee hospital in Kent; and, back in New Zealand, lectured frankly to Servicewomen on sex education. In the winter of 1947, at age 75, she flew to bleak, isolated sub-Antarctic Chatham Island to act as a locum when the Medical Officer became seriously ill. Here she travelled on horseback. (In 1908 she had been the first woman in Wellington to own and drive a car, known as the Pill box). Agnes was awarded an Order of the British Empire the following year.

In 1955 Agnes donated £10,000 to the University of Sydney to found an aeronautical laboratory in memory of her parents. She died on 27 November 1960 and was cremated with Presbyterian rites. She donated her two houses in Wellington to the Women's Division of Federated Farmers of New Zealand (similar to the Australian CWA).

Agnes' 30 years of tireless work with the St. Helen's Maternity Hospital established a world wide reputation for New Zealand in the prevention of pre and neo natal, and maternal mortality; with standardized aseptic procedures and separate delivery rooms and high quality professional training of midwives and maternity nurses. In 1931 New Zealand created history by sending two women doctors to the British Medical Association Conference in England. Agnes was one of them.

To encourage and support women in higher education, she founded the Wellington Branch of the International Federation of University Women, and promoted the importance of sabbatical leave to broaden horizons. Her wide sphere of influence and her substantial reputation enabled Agnes to continually work towards equality for women in many different areas.

In her book *Heroic Australian Women at War* (2004) Susanna De Vries quotes early nineteenth century German philosopher George Hegel: *Women's limited mental capacity equips them only for housework and child rearing. Women cannot succeed in science or allied fields and are incapable of intellectual achievements ...* and adds her comment *Agnes Bennett proved him wrong.*

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*Held in JSNWL

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