

## AUSTRALIAN WOMEN FACT FILE

### SISTER ELIZABETH KENNY

(1880-1952)

#### Nurse and Polio Therapy Pioneer

- 1880 Born 20 September in Warialda, northern New South Wales
- 1890 Family moved to Darling Downs, southern Queensland
- 1910 Started her bush nursing career and began caring for polio patients
- 1913 Set up bush nursing clinic for polio patients at Clifton, near Toowoomba
- 1915 Enlisted in Australian Army Nursing Service serving on troop carriers
- 1918 Awarded British War Medal and medically retired with leg injury and myocarditis
- 1926 Adopted a child, Mary Stewart, who was to become one of her most significant therapists
- 1930–36 Polio clinics established in major cities in Queensland, NSW and Tasmania
- 1935–38 Queensland Government Royal Commission into the Kenny method of rehabilitation
- 1937 Published her first book *Infantile paralysis and cerebral diplegia* and taught her methods in UK  
Elizabeth Kenny Institute opened in Minneapolis, USA
- 1942 Voted outstanding Woman of the Year in New York.  
Autobiography *And they shall walk* published
- 1946 Film *Sister Kenny* made of her life
- 1947 Pope Pius XII presented her with the Medal of the Holy Family  
Honorary Doctor of Science from Rutgers and Rochester Universities
- 1951–2 Returned to Australia and died the following year in Toowoomba of Parkinson's disease
- 1955 *My battle and victory* published posthumously in London

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**Elizabeth Kenny** was the fifth child of Mary (Moore) and Michael Kenny, an Irish immigrant farmer. Her early years were spent between northern NSW and Queensland as her father sought itinerant farm work. This meant much moving from town to town; a basic education in country schools; and a variety of occupations which gave her practical experience and developed an independent spirit.

She acquired nursing skills as a voluntary aid in Guyra hospital and later extended her services to private 'bush' nursing from their home on the Darling Downs. During this period around 1911 Dr Aeneas McDonnell of Toowoomba, who taught her anatomy and physiology, and encouraged her abilities in caring for his young patients with Poliomyelitis or 'Infantile Paralysis'<sup>1</sup>, as it was then known, befriended her. She had observed Aboriginal children being treated with hot cloths and massage in their bush camps, and worked with this idea, finding it relieved pain whilst encouraging and re-

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educating movement in the affected muscles. This was the opposite to the conventional medical treatment of the time, which usually immobilised the affected areas with splints causing deformation by increasing muscle weakness and loss of calcium from the bones.

By 1913, she had set up her own small hospital for rehabilitating children with polio at Clifton near Toowoomba. Her methods worked well, but she was later to be criticised by the medical authorities because it was unorthodox and she was untutored in her ways.

In 1915 she joined the Australian Army Nursing Service where she earned the title of 'Sister' on hospital ships, nursing the wounded as they were being brought home. She did twelve round sea voyages between England and Australia and was wounded in the leg. She also invented a shock-proof stretcher, which she later patented as 'the Sylvia Stretcher'. This, with her war pension, earned her some financial independence. After the war she resumed her home nursing and became first president of her local chapter of the newly formed Country Women's Association (see Fact File on Grace Munro, Founding CWA President).

At the beginning of the first polio epidemic in 1930, her successful treatment of a child in Townsville attracted many more patients. She established a clinic there and applied for a government subsidy. Clinics using her methods were subsequently set up in Cairns, Rockhampton, Toowoomba, Brisbane, Newcastle, Sydney, Melbourne, and Hobart. In 1935 a royal commission, chaired by Sir Raphael Cilento, was set up to enquire into her methods, and gave an unfavourable report. In spite of what she fiercely claimed to be a vendetta against her 'untrained' methods by medical authorities, she published a textbook in 1937 and fought valiantly against the unfair criticisms which belied the good results she was getting with her unorthodox treatments. Grateful parents raised money for her to go to England where she demonstrated her methods in two wards of the Queen Mary's Hospital in Carshalton, Surrey, again without the support of the medical profession. Later she returned to Australia and was given a ward in the Brisbane General Hospital where her patients recovered much more quickly than those treated with splints. In spite of this, the medical profession continued to ignore, even vilify her.

However, in 1940, with the support of six Brisbane doctors and the Queensland Government, who paid her fare, she left for the United States where her renown had preceded her. She began courses for doctors and physiotherapists from all over the world and her methods became widely accepted. She became an American celebrity; featured in *Time*, *Life* and *Newsweek*; and was celebrated in a film *Sister Kenny* made in 1946, starring Rosalind Russell.

The Sister Kenny Institute in Minneapolis was opened in 1942 in her honour, and remains a leading centre for the rehabilitation of paralysis and other musculo-skeletal conditions. She continued her work, travelling, teaching and demonstrating her methods and published four more books including an autobiography *And they shall walk* (1946). She returned to Australia several times before her death in Toowoomba in 1952. Unfortunately, the medical establishment, which had first opposed her in Australia, never gave her the recognition that she found in other countries.

She was a big-hearted and determined woman who had the courage of her convictions, and did not back down from what she believed was effective and life-giving treatment, even though the daunting pressure of medical opposition was mostly

aligned against her. Her legacy includes a Chair of Rural and Remote Nursing established by the Nursing Faculty of the University of Southern Queensland, as well as the hundreds of her patients, who remember her with love and gratitude because, as a result of her ministrations, they were enabled to walk again.

### Sources

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<sup>1</sup> Infantile paralysis was the first name given to Poliomyelitis, a viral disease of the myelin sheath surrounding nerves causing muscle paralysis and death in severe cases. An epidemic appeared in Norway and Sweden in 1840 and again in 1905. Pandemic outbreaks occurred in Europe and North America, Australia and New Zealand during the 1930–50's and eventually led to the development of the Salk vaccine in 1955 which virtually controlled the disease.

\* Held in JSNWL

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