

Public health administration: the genesis of the Board of Health

The morning of the 25 May 1881 was most unpleasant. A gusty southerly was blowing storm clouds across the harbour and the scudding showers were merging into heavy rain. It was a day of gloomy portent for On Chong in his humble abode at 223 Lower George Street. He was an inoffensive Chinaman, one of the many moon-faced coolies who had drifted into Sydney town. At this moment he was worried and bewildered, and oblivious of the chill wind whistling through the broken window pane into his drab and bare bedroom. Its only furnishings were two beds, the one in the corner still disturbed by the feverish tossings of his son throughout the night. He had tried to soothe him these last three nights as his delirium worsened, and pus sores erupted over his face and down his legs and arms. He had watched him grow weaker and his fretful cries sink into a pathetic whimper. And now he had gone, whisked away in haste to the North Head Quarantine Station with the dreaded smallpox. On Chong did not understand the implications nor the inoculation which had been forced upon him. He was more fearful of the reaction of his neighbours, many of whom were resentful of Chinese and the yellow peril which, the broadsheets had proclaimed, were threatening the morality and livelihood of 'white Australia'. He was unappreciative of the historical significance of the event – the commencement of the first major outbreak of smallpox in NSW since the inexplicable outbreak among the Aborigines in 1793.

Nor were the Government and the Medical Adviser unduly alarmed. None of the contacts or associates of On Chong displayed any evidence of the disease, and it appeared that it could be contained by isolating On Chong. But this complacency was to be shattered by the sequences which followed. The State was to be confronted with an outbreak in a population unprotected by vaccination and unprepared for its consequences. Within 20 days more cases appeared in the City suburbs followed by a further outcrop

after a similar interval. Now there was spreading fear and panic. The one doctor experienced with the disease, Health Officer Dr H.G. Alleyne, was absent on sick leave and refused to return to take control. In his absence a meeting of Heads of Departments was hurriedly summoned, and they decided that the Quarantine Station was to be used to isolate patients and those in direct contact with them. In the absence of any smallpox hospital there was no alternative. But even this was not absolute. Patients could be quarantined in their homes if they could afford the daily visit of a doctor and there was no effective law to prevent this. These arrangements were controlled by the Under Secretary of Treasury who used the police force to carry out his decisions.

The situation rapidly degenerated into a shambles. The staff of the Quarantine Station was small, fearful of the disease and loathe to support the patients. Supplies of stores and clothing were insufficient, and the general organisation lacked leadership and was unsuited to the occasion. Transport through the streets and to the Station was inefficient, and circumstances on the Station led to mixing of persons afflicted with smallpox with those who were free from the disease. Morale was non-existent and treatment negligible.

The Board of Advice

Public panic was unallayed and criticism of the Government vociferous in the press and Parliament. Action had to be taken urgently and a special Cabinet meeting was called on 9 July, by the Premier, Sir Henry Parkes, at which the Colonial Treasurer, Mr J. Watson, and Under Secretary of Treasury, Mr Geoffrey Eager, were present to report on the quarantine law and the administration of quarantine services. The decision of Cabinet was unanimous. An organisation must be established to relieve Treasury of its quarantine administration, and it must

be composed of persons of authority and vested with special powers through these persons, to contain and control the epidemic threatening the security of the State and the future of the Government.

Sir Henry Parkes may have remembered the previous attempt by Dr H.G. Douglass to legislate for a Central Board of Health which would have been a very suitable instrument for the purpose. But the legislation had lapsed and there was no time for special legislation nor any existing which could give executive status to any Committee or Board on this

model. It had to be a Board of Advice only, but one which was strengthened by unqualified Government support and with sufficient funds for the purpose. Because of the latter and the present role of quarantine as a unit of Treasury, the board would likewise be responsible to Government through the Colonial Treasurer.

The Premier was pleased to announce the establishment of a Board of Advice on 11 July 1881, and of the same date the Colonial Treasurer issued a memo to its members setting out its composition and extraordinary powers(96):

“Subject:

Appointment of a Board of Advice to Assist in Preventing the spread of smallpox

I think it desirable that a number of gentlemen should be appointed as a Board of Advice or Board of Health to advise with and assist the Government in preventing the spread of smallpox; such board to have power to act in cases of emergency and incur expenditure without consulting the Government in cases of urgent necessity to an amount not exceeding £200 – the gentlemen are:

The Mayor of Sydney*
The Under Secretary for Finance and Trade,
The Inspector General of Police,
The Health Officer,
The Colonial Architect,
and Dr Alfred Roberts.

The latter gentleman to be paid reasonable professional fees for attending in such board.

J. Watson.”

Dr Charles MacKellar was appointed in September when he succeeded Dr H.G. Alleyne as Medical Adviser to the Government.

The first meeting was held on 18 July, with the Mayor in the Chair and all attended. Meetings were frequent at weekly or two-weekly intervals as determined by the board at its sittings. It had powers of co-option. The Mayor was Chairman when present, otherwise the board elected a Chairman for the meeting. It met at the Treasury Building at 127 Macquarie Street and existed as a Board of Advice until 31 December 1881, when it was translated into the Board of Health with statutory recognition as such under the provisions of the *Infectious Diseases Supervision Act 1881* (45 Vic. No. 25).

The Board of Advice was vigorous, efficient, and determined in its task of combating the smallpox epidemic for which it was created. In anticipation of its first meeting the Government had made regulations for the conduct of an ambulance and disinfecting staff. The first residence to be disinfected was that of Lum Kum Fry under the supervision of Dr Louis Foncart, Assistant Health Officer to the Port. The disinfectant used was carbolic acid which at that time was in short supply. The Under Secretary for Finance and Trade (Treasury) placed an order for 3,000 gallons on London.

* The persons involved were: The Mayor of Sydney, the Hon. J. Harris; Under Secretary Finance and Trade, the Hon. G. Eager; Inspector General of Police, E. Fosberg, Esq.; Health Officer Dr H.G. Alleyne; and Colonial Architect, James Barnet Esq.