

Homeopathic Hospitals and the Battle with Allopathy in Colonial Australia

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Abstract

The practice of homeopathy was prevalent in the nineteenth century and it is unsurprising that it came to Australia with its mainly British immigrants. The paper explores who were the practitioners, from where they came, and focuses particularly on the development of the first homeopathic hospital in the southern hemisphere: The Melbourne Homœopathic Dispensary and Hospital in the Colony of Victoria. It was staffed mainly by doctors who had received a conventional medical training, including two early graduates from The University of Melbourne. Others had been sourced from homeopathic universities in the United States. The hospital received high level support from the upper echelons of Melbourne society as well as the community.

It can be argued that, overall, the homeopathic hospital did little harm at a time when conventional medicine had so many limitations. It is perhaps ironic that by the middle of the twentieth century the hospital (by then Prince Henry's Hospital) had become a teaching hospital for two of the city's universities. It is unsurprising that 'regular' doctors tried hard to assert their superior credentials, and some of their efforts are described. Noteworthy were the efforts of medical members of colonial parliaments to promote legislation to impede the 'quacks'. Alternative practitioners continue to exist, of course, and the history of the nineteenth century makes a useful counterpoint to that of the 21st.

Keywords

Homeopathy, Allopathy, Homeopathic practitioners, Hospitals, Medical legislation, Colonial Australia

Introduction

In the early days of colonial Australia, ‘quacks’ were rife and competition with ‘regular’ or ‘orthodox’ medical practitioners – nearly all of whom had trained in Great Britain – was often acrimonious. This paper traces the rise and fall of one particular group that this author has chosen to label as quacks: the homeopathic practitioners. The focus is on Melbourne in the colony of Victoria, but the paper will discuss the development of homeopathy elsewhere in Australia for context.¹

The principles and early history of homeopathy

The founder of homeopathy was Christian Friedrich Samuel Hahnemann (Figure 1), who was born in Saxony in 1755 and died in 1843. He studied medicine in Leipzig, Vienna and Erlangen, and completed his doctorate in 1779 at Friedrich-Alexander University, Erlangen-Nürnberg.²

In 1829 Hahnemann published the book which set out the basis for his theories, *Organon der Heilkunst (Instrument of the Healing Arts)*.³ Based on experiments with a variety of substances, which he found produced side effects similar to the symptoms of particular diseases, the thesis he propounded was to treat ‘like with like’ (*similia similibus curentur*): ‘*Das Heilvermögen der Arzneien beruht daher anf ihren der Krankheit ähnlichen* (the healing power of medicines is therefore based on their similarity to the disease).’ But it was important that the amount be very small, and if the treatment did not work, it indicated that the dose of medicine was not small enough (*die Gabe nicht klein genug war*).⁴ Indeed, the serial dilutions often recommended by Hahnemann – a million-fold or more – would mean that nearly always the remedy contained only water, with no molecules of the diluted substance remaining. The Melbourne historian Jacqueline Templeton whimsically described this theory of minimal dosing as ‘treatment by a hair of the dog that bit you’, but a better analogy would be treatment by the thought of a hair of the dog that bit you.⁵

Nevertheless, as Alice Kuzniar notes, the gentleness of homeopathic ‘remedies’ perhaps needs to be compared with the drastic, dangerous, and ineffective treatments that were often employed by traditional doctors at Hahnemann’s time: purgatives, emetics and bloodletting.⁶ This is a theme which will be taken up later.

¹ Particularly in the nineteenth century, homeopathy was spelled homœopathy, using the œ digraph. This paper will replicate that spelling when it is part of a proper name, for instance the Melbourne Homœopathic Dispensary, but otherwise will use the more modern spelling in which the digraph is replaced with a single ‘e’.

² Patil BK, Ghandi MA. The Life and Legacy of Samuel Hahnemann: Founder of Homoeopathy and His Medical Philosophy. *Cureus*. 2024; 16(9): e70489.

³ Hahnemann S. *Organon der Heilkunst*. Dresden: Arnoldischen Buchhandlung; 1829.

⁴ Hahnemann. *Organon*, 1829 (Note 3). p.277.

⁵ Templeton J. *Prince Henry's: The Evolution of a Melbourne Hospital, 1869-1969*. Melbourne: Robertson & Mullens; 1969. p.3.

⁶ Kuzniar A. *Homeopathy: A Child of Its Time*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press; 2017. p.6-7; Kuzniar is Professor of Germanic and Slavic studies in the University of Waterloo, Toronto.

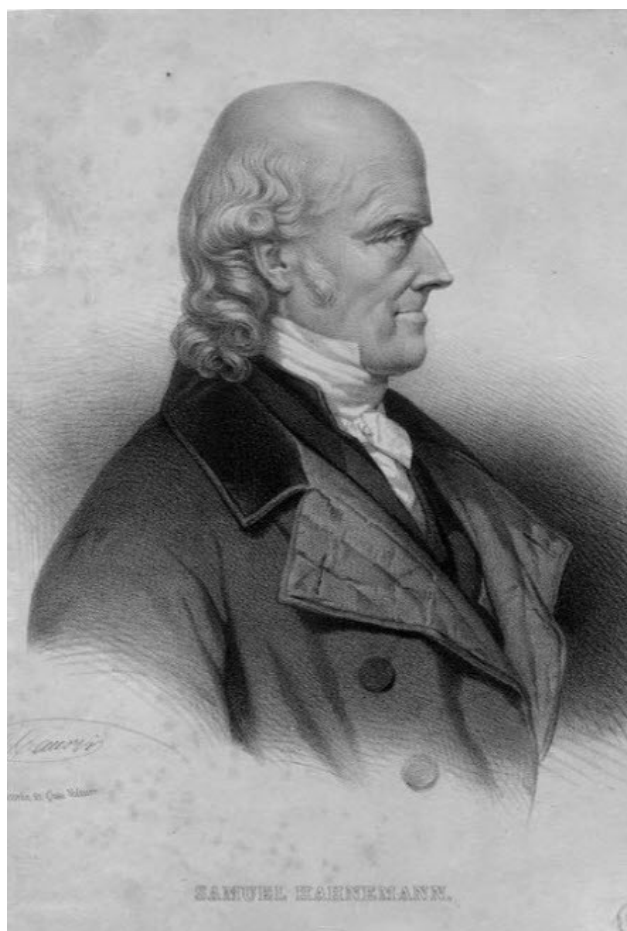


Figure 1. Samuel Hahnemann. Lithographed portrait bust. National Museum of American History, Washington DC. Creative Commons Zero (CC0) Licence. <https://n2t.net/ark:/65665/ng49ca746ab-b361-704b-e053-15f76fa0b4fa>.

Homeopathy rapidly gained popularity in Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century. Factors that contributed were its apparent success in a number of high-profile cases and in epidemics. In reviewing the data, Peter Fisher, formerly at the Royal London Hospital for Integrative Medicine, found a lower mortality in epidemics treated by homeopaths in 1830-31 and asked whether the difference was due to homeopaths curing their patients or orthodox practitioners, utilising bloodletting, killing theirs.⁷ Most unusually for the period, homeopathy was actually subjected to a nineteenth-century randomised trial, which found no benefit.⁸ But, for the population at large, the finding would have been unknown and its scientific significance incomprehensible, at a time when the very concept of a randomised trial would have been foreign to almost everyone.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, homeopathy had spread to many countries in the world, winning converts in not only Great Britain, but also throughout

⁷ Fisher P. What is homeopathy? An introduction. *Frontiers in Bioscience (Elite Ed)*. 2012; 4(5): 1669-82.

⁸ Stolberg M. Inventing the randomized double-blind trial: the Nuremberg salt test of 1835. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*. 2006; 99(12): 642-643.

Western Europe. Homeopathy also proliferated in the USA where by 1898 there were 142 homeopathic hospitals and twenty medical schools.⁹

With this background, devotees of homeopathy both as patients and practitioners were among the predominantly British migrants to the Australian colonies in the nineteenth century.¹⁰ This paper will first discuss how homeopathy evolved in the colony of Victoria, the capital of which, Melbourne, was for a brief period following the gold rush of the 1860s one of the largest and wealthiest in the world.¹¹ Finally, it will examine the push-back from conventional – often called allopathic – practitioners as they tried to establish the superiority of their system against the homeopaths.

Melbourne Homœopathic Dispensary and Hospital

On 30 October 1869, a group of sixteen gentlemen met in Melbourne ‘to consult as to the advisability of establishing a dispensary for the treatment of the poor on the principles of Homœopathy.’ They obtained premises to lease at 153 Collins Street East, not far from the colonial Parliament House and the rooms of several of the city’s early doctors. It opened just over three weeks later, on 22 November 1869, for the treatment of outpatients.¹² Then, at a public meeting on 14 January 1875, a resolution moved by the Anglican Dean of Melbourne was passed unanimously:

That it is desirable at once to open a Homœopathic Hospital for the more effectual treatment of sick persons in accordance with that system of medicine. And that the Melbourne Homœopathic Dispensary and the proposed Hospital be united in one Institution.¹³

A temporary location was found in a three-storey building in Spring Street, close to the original dispensary, which opened on 27 September 1876 with an outpatient department and beds for fourteen inpatients.¹⁴ Subsequently, the colonial government made available a site just south of the Yarra River, on what was to become one of Melbourne’s grand boulevards, St Kilda Road. On this was built the definitive hospital (Figure 2), opened by the Chief Secretary (Premier) of Victoria, Sir Graham Berry (1822-1904), on 14 October 1885.¹⁵

⁹ Nicholls PA. *Homoeopathy and the Medical Profession*. London: Croom Helm; 1988. p.193.

¹⁰ Martyr P. *Paradise of Quacks: An Alternative History of Medicine in Australia*. Paddington, NSW: Macleay Press; 2002. p.53-54.

¹¹ Davison G. *The rise and fall of marvellous Melbourne*. 2nd Ed. (Vol. 1). Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press; 2004. p.233.

¹² Homœopathic Hospital Annual Reports. Public Records Office Victoria (PROV): VPRS19314/C1. 1870. p.4.

¹³ Annual Reports (Note 12). 1875. p.2.

¹⁴ Armstong B. History of Homoeopathy in Australia. The Centre for Australian Homoeopathic History. <https://www.historyofhomeopathy.au/> (accessed 16 October 2025). See: Melbourne Homœopathic Hospital.

¹⁵ Melbourne Homoeopathic Dispensary and Hospital Committee Minute Books. PROV: VPRS19316/C1. 21 Oct 1885.



Figure 2. Melbourne Homœopathic Hospital, c1900. Homœopathic Hospital Annual Reports. PROV: VPRS19314/C1. 1907. Frontispiece.

Supporting the Dispensary and then the Hospital was a ‘Who’s Who’ of early Melbourne: the first patron was the Lord Bishop of Melbourne, James Alipius Goold (1812-86); the President of the Board was the colonial Chief Justice, Sir William Stawell (1815-89); while the Dean of Melbourne, The Very Rev H B Macartney (1799-1894) was a member of the first Board.¹⁶ For the rest of the century, the Dispensary and Hospital continued to receive high level support. The Patrons were successive colonial governors and usually their wives: George Phipps, the Second Marquis of Normanby (1819-190) in 1883; Sir Henry Loch (1827-1900) and Lady Elizabeth Loch (1841-1938) from 1884 to 1889; John Hope, 7th Earl of Hopetoun (1860-1908) and Countess Hersey Hopetoun (1867-1937) from 1890 to 1895; Lord Thomas Brassey (1836-1918) and Lady Sybil Brassey (1858-1934) from 1896 to 1899.¹⁷ Sir William Stawell retired as President of the Board in 1887, having been appointed Lieutenant-Governor of the colony, and was replaced by Sir William J Clarke (1805-74), then Sir Rupert Clarke (1865-1926), both members of the Colony’s Legislative Council.¹⁸ ¹⁹ The colonial government also provided monetary support, as it did for the major allopathic hospitals in the city, though the larger part of the hospital’s income came from contributors and from fees paid by those patients able to afford them.²⁰ ²¹

¹⁶ Annual Reports (Note 12). 1870. p.2.

¹⁷ Annual Reports (Note 12). 1883, 1884, 1890 & 1896.

¹⁸ Annual Reports (Note 12). 1888 & 1898.

¹⁹ MLC: Member of Legislative Council, the upper house in colonial Parliament.

²⁰ See for example: Annual Reports (Note 12). 1886. p.14-15.

²¹ Dickey B. Health and the state in Australia, 1788-1977. *Journal of Australian Studies*. 1977; 1(2): 50-63.

The doctors, their background and service

A prime mover in the creation of the Dispensary and Hospital was Dr Johannes Werner Günt (1825-94), shown in Figure 3. Born in Amsterdam, he obtained his MD from the University of Leyden in 1847, then came to Sydney in 1852 where he practised as an allopathic physician and analytic chemist.²² In 1854, he travelled to New Caledonia where he was the only survivor of a pioneer party that had explored the mountainous interior, the others having been captured by the natives and eaten. He was rescued by a government ship and returned to Australia, where he is reported to have practised as a physician in the northern rivers district of New South Wales.²³ If so, he was unlicensed since he was not registered by the Medical Board of New South Wales until 1865, the same year as he appeared on the Medical Register for the colony of Victoria.²⁴

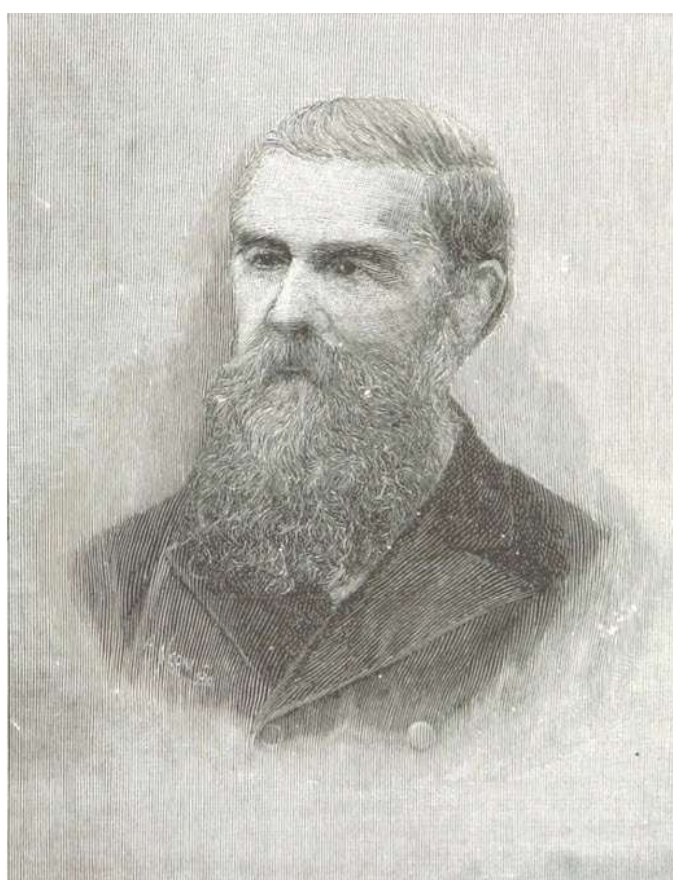


Figure 3. Johannes Werner Günt MD. In: Sutherland. *Victoria and its metropolis*, 1888 (Note 23). p.519.

²² Gunst, Johan Werner (1825-1894). Encyclopedia of Australian Science and Innovation. <https://www.eoas.info/biogs/P004825b.htm#pub-resources> (accessed 16 Oct 2025).

²³ Sutherland A. *Victoria and its metropolis: past and present*, Vol. 2. Melbourne: McCarron, Bird & Co; 1888. p.519.

²⁴ Yeomans ND. Prosopography of Australia's Immigrant Doctors, 1838-1984. The University of Melbourne. Dataset. https://figshare.unimelb.edu.au/articles/dataset/ND_Yeomans-prosopography_of_Australia_s_immigrant_doctors_1838-1984/19729972?file=35052916.

In 1869, his occupation was listed in the Melbourne and Suburban Directory as 'physician', but from the 1870 edition onwards it was 'homeopathic physician'.^{25 26} By then he was a committed homeopath, and edited and published a monthly homeopathic journal, although it survived just one year. In the preface he wrote:

Thousands of Physicians are now engaged as Homoeopathists, in widely different parts of the globe; and in many places where Homoeopathy was but a few years since looked upon as sheer chicanery, or, at best but delusion, it is now recognized as a beneficial reality, and is held in high estimation; every year expanding its boundaries of operation, and in every year adding to its favorable reception and adoption in Victoria.²⁷

Günst was closely involved with the Dispensary and Hospital until his death in 1894: appointed as one of the first three Honorary Medical Officers, serving on its Board from 1879, and in 1891 being the only person appointed Honorary Consulting Physician.²⁸

The second founding doctor at the Dispensary was Robert Ray (1828-83) who had trained in London, qualifying LRCP (Lond) MRCS (Eng) in 1862.^{29 30} He arrived in Melbourne in 1862 and advertised that he was a consulting homœopathic physician and late house-surgeon to the London Homœopathic Hospital.³¹ He remained on the honorary consulting staff of the Melbourne Homœopathic Hospital until his death in 1883.

James Pascoe Teague (1837-1929), the third of the founding honorary medical staff shown in Figure 4, was born in Cornwall, UK. He went to the USA to study medicine at the College of Homœopathic Medicine in Pennsylvania, graduating MD in 1859.³² He arrived in Melbourne in 1862 and applied to the Medical Board of Victoria to be registered. The Board noted that he was a graduate of the Homœopathic College but rejected his application on the grounds that he was unable to shew [sic] that 'this diploma authorised him to practise medicine or surgery in the Country to which the university belonged'.³³

²⁵ *Sands & McDougall's Melbourne and Suburban Directory for 1869*. Melbourne: Sands & McDougall; 1869. p.14.

²⁶ *Sands & McDougall's Melbourne and Suburban Directory for 1870*. Melbourne: Sands & McDougall; 1870. p.13.

²⁷ Günst JW. *Homœopathic Progress in Australia: A Monthly Journal of Record and Domestic Practice*. Melbourne: E. Purton & Co; 1871.

²⁸ Annual Reports (Note 12). 1870, 1873 & 1891.

²⁹ Yeomans. Prosopography (Note 24).

³⁰ Medical Board of Victoria. Medical Register (VMR). 1844-1998. PROV: VPRS16394. No. 258.

³¹ Anon. Homoeopathy – Dr Ray Consulting Homoeopathic Physician. *The Argus* (Melbourne, Vic.). 12 Sep 1862. p.3.

³² Yeomans. Prosopography (Note 24); VMR. No. 313 (Note 30).

³³ Medical Board of Victoria Minutes. 1853-1965. PROV: VPRS16389. 20 Jul 1862.

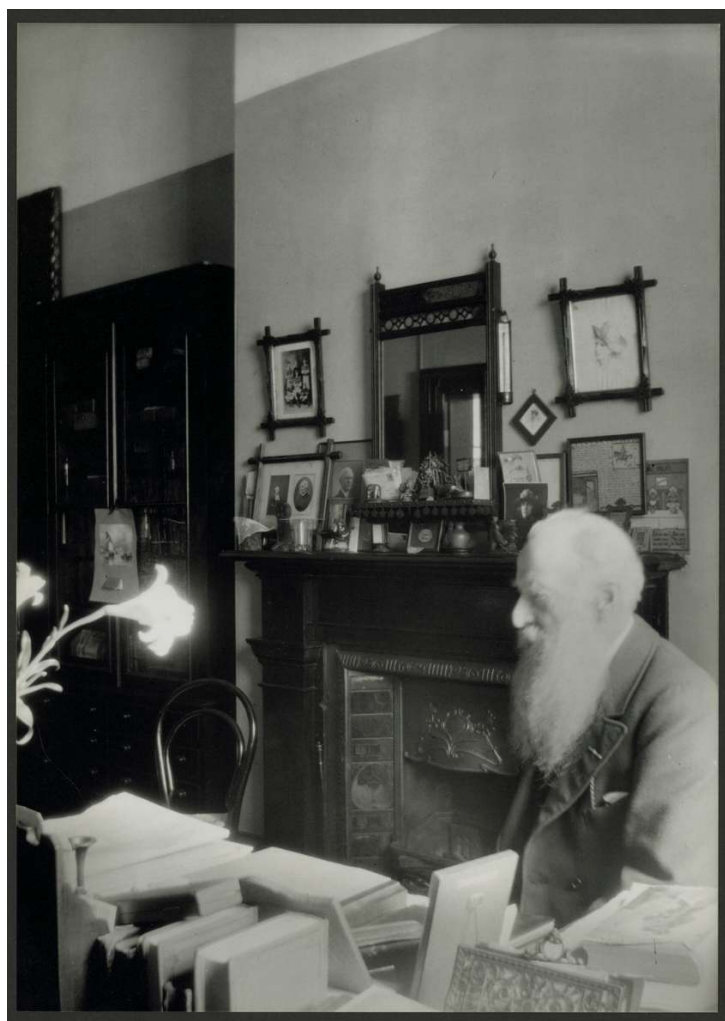


Figure 4. James Pascoe Teague MD, in his office at 89 Collins Street, Melbourne, Vic. (undated). State Library Victoria, H2009.45/669.

The Victorian Medical Practitioners Act had just been amended to allow the registration of not only legally qualified medical practitioners from England, Scotland or Ireland but also graduates from foreign countries ‘who shall prove ... to the satisfaction of the medical Board of Victoria ... that he has passed through a regular course of medical study of not less than three years’ duration in a school of medicine or surgery’ and passed its examinations.³⁴ We can speculate that the Board may have used its discretion (‘to the satisfaction’) to reject his homeopathic training as not being ‘a regular course of medical study.’ Teague was persistent, though, and his supporters sent a deputation to the Board to argue his case. Perhaps as a result, and also a letter from the Dean of the Pennsylvania College, the board reconsidered and granted him registration in January 1863.³⁵ Teague joined Drs Günt and Ray as the founding honorary medical officers at the Dispensary in 1869 and was still serving in that role at the close of the century.

³⁴ Medical Practitioners Act of 1862 (28 Vict. No. 262) (Vic.).

³⁵ Medical Board Minutes (Note 33). 2 & 21 Jan 1863.

During the remainder of the nineteenth century, a further eighteen doctors were appointed as Honorary Medical Officers (Table 1), divided into Honorary Physicians and Honorary Surgeons, serving both inpatients and outpatients on a roster. Two were graduates of the Boston University School of (homeopathic) Medicine, and this appeared to raise no concern when they presented to the Victorian Medical Board for registration, which entered their qualifications simply as MD Boston.³⁶ Two others were graduates of the young University of Melbourne medical school, which had commenced in 1862 with a conventional six-year British curriculum that did not teach homeopathy.³⁷ The remainder of the Honorary medical staff had all trained in Scotland, Ireland or England.

Name	Qualifications	Year qualified	Year registered*	Years on staff
Johannes W Günt	MD (Leiden)	1847	1865	1869-73
Robert Ray	LRCP (Lond) MRCS (Eng)	1862	1862	1869-83
James P Teague	MD (Homeopath. Coll. Penn., USA)	1859	1863	1869-
James E Gould	LRCP (Edin)	1872	1873	1874-79
George T Teague	MB (Melb)	1873	1873	1877-82
Alexander Murray	MB (Melb)	1877	1878	1879-87
William R Ray	MD (Boston)	1882	1882	1883-
John Maffey	LRCP LRCS (Edin)	1869	1883	1883-88
Adolphe F Seelenmeyer	MD (Brussels) LRCP LRCS (Edin)	1885	1887	1887-95
Richard Wallace	LRCP LRCS (Edin) LFPS (Glasg)	1864	1888	1889-92
Henry Wheeler	LRCP (Lond) MRCS (Eng)	1860	1889	1890-93
James RP Lambert	MB ChM (Edin)	1890	1891	1891-93
Wilbur K Bouton	MD (Boston)	1885	1885	1891-
Ralph S Stephenson	MB ChM (Edin)	1890	1891	1893-5
E Alleyne Cook	LRCP LRCS (Edin) LFPS (Glasg)	1880	1893	1894-
John A Scott	MB ChM (Edin)	1889	1893	1895-
W Warren	LKQCP LRCS (Ireland)	1872	1879	1895-
Percy Wisewould	MB ChM (Edin)	1887	1888	1895-

*Registered by Medical Board of Victoria.

Table 1. Honorary medical staff appointed to the Melbourne Homœopathic Dispensary and Hospital until the end of the nineteenth century. Dates of appointment to the Dispensary and Hospital extracted from: Homœopathic Hospital Annual Reports (Note 12). 1870-1899. Registration and qualifications data from: Yeomans. Prosopography (Note 24).

³⁶ Medical Board Minutes (Note 33). 4 Aug 1882 & 2 Oct 1885.

³⁷ Russell KF. The foundation of the medical school of The University of Melbourne. *Medical Journal of Australia*. 1962; 2(6): 228-231.

As the hospital and the doctors got busier, the Board decided in November 1884 to search for a Resident Medical Officer to assist the Honorary doctors when the new hospital opened the following year.³⁸ After an extensive search, during which ‘advertisements were placed in all the leading papers of the Colonies, and communication entered into with the principal Homœopathic seats of learning in the world’, the appointment was offered to Dr WK Bouton who had recently graduated from the Boston Homeopathic University, to take up his appointment on the first of October 1885.³⁹ Subsequent Board minutes during his five-year tenure indicate that he filled the role with distinction, finally asking to be relieved of the position so he could enter private practice in 1891. The Board accepted his resignation ‘with regret’ and hoped that he would still maintain a connection with the institution.⁴⁰ ‘His active interest, kindness of disposition, and unwearied attention have in no small degree contributed to the high estimation in which the Hospital is held by both patients and public.’⁴¹ Bouton promptly applied for an honorary position at the hospital, and was appointed Honorary Surgeon in 1891, a position he held for more than 30 years, as well as being elected to President of the Board in 1920 concurrently with his Honorary Surgeon role.⁴² In an undated letter, but believed to have been in 1934, two years before he died, all the medical staff wrote to him to express their gratitude.

We, the members of the Honorary Medical Staff of the Homoeopathic Hospital, being conscious of the long-continued and faithful service you have rendered to the sick and suffering, desire to express to you our deep admiration of the fidelity and patience which have at all times been displayed by you in the zealous discharge of your professional and other manifold duties, which have oftentimes been of an onerous and a very important nature.

By constant self-sacrifice and devotion to your life work, which we know you love so well, and in which you have shown such outstanding and conspicuous ability, you have earned the enduring regard, respect and esteem, not only of the medical staff, but also the Officers and Nursing Staffs, as well as that large number of co-workers with you in the many activities in which our Institution is engaged ...

With cordial greetings, and ever best wishes to you and Mrs Bouton,

We are, Dear Dr Bouton,

Yours very sincerely.

[Signed by 21 members of the Honorary Medical staff]⁴³

³⁸ Hospital Minute Books (Note 15). 19 Nov 1884.

³⁹ Annual Reports (Note 12). 1885. p.9.

⁴⁰ Hospital Minute Books (Note 15). 15 Apr 1891.

⁴¹ Annual Reports (Note 12). 1891. p.14.

⁴² Annual Reports (Note 12). 1919. Frontispiece.

⁴³ Letter to Dr W.K. Bouton from members of the Honorary Medical Staff. PROV: VPRS19317/C1. 88.16.4.

Name	Qualifications	Year qualified	Year registered*	Years as RMO
Wilbur K Bouton	MD (Boston)	1885	1885	1885-91
Ralph S Stephenson	MB ChM (Edin)	1890	1891	1891-93
William S Ross	BA MB ChB (Dublin)	1889	1891	1891-94
James Cook	LRCP LRCS (Edin) LFPS (Glasg)	1892	1893	1893-95
Henry Cook	MB ChB (Durham)	1891	1894	1895-98
Gilbert M Teague	MB ChM (Edin)	1896	1898	1898-99
William GC Clark	MD (Boston)	1895	1898	1899-
William L Soule	MD (Boston)	1896	1899	1899-

* Registered by Medical Board of Victoria

Table 2. Resident medical officers appointed to the Melbourne Homœopathic Hospital during the nineteenth century. Dates of appointment to the Dispensary and Hospital extracted from: Homœopathic Hospital Annual Reports (Note 12). 1885-1899. Registration and qualifications data from Note 24. Registration and qualifications data from: Yeomans. Prosopography (Note 24).

It is often a tribute when one person retires and needs to be replaced by two. This was the case in 1891 when the hospital replaced Dr Bouton as Resident Medical Officer. His successors up to 1899 are listed in Table 2: four were British graduates, and two like Bouton had been recruited from the Boston Homeopathic University. Its dean, Dr Sutherland, enthusiastically assisted the Melbourne Board to source candidates. After they took his recommendation and appointed William Clark in 1898, Sutherland advised the Board that he had advanced the sum of 300 [US] dollars to cover the cost of Dr Clark's passage from Boston to Melbourne but would not charge the Melbourne hospital 'since the cause was a worthy one'.⁴⁴ It is of interest that the Boston University students received their clinical tuition at Boston City Hospital over the vigorous protests of Harvard University, which sent its own allopathic medical students there and had sought exclusive access.⁴⁵

The patients, their conditions and treatment

Starting with the first hospital in Spring Street, the numbers of inpatients increased dramatically over the colonial years, reaching over a thousand admissions in 1899. Figure 5 graphs this, together with the mortality rates, which mostly lay in the range of five to ten percent with a gradual downward trend from 1889.

⁴⁴ Hospital Minute Books (Note 15). 17 Aug 1898.

⁴⁵ Kaufman M. *Homeopathy in America: The Rise and Fall of a Medical Heresy*. Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins Press; 1971. p.151-152.

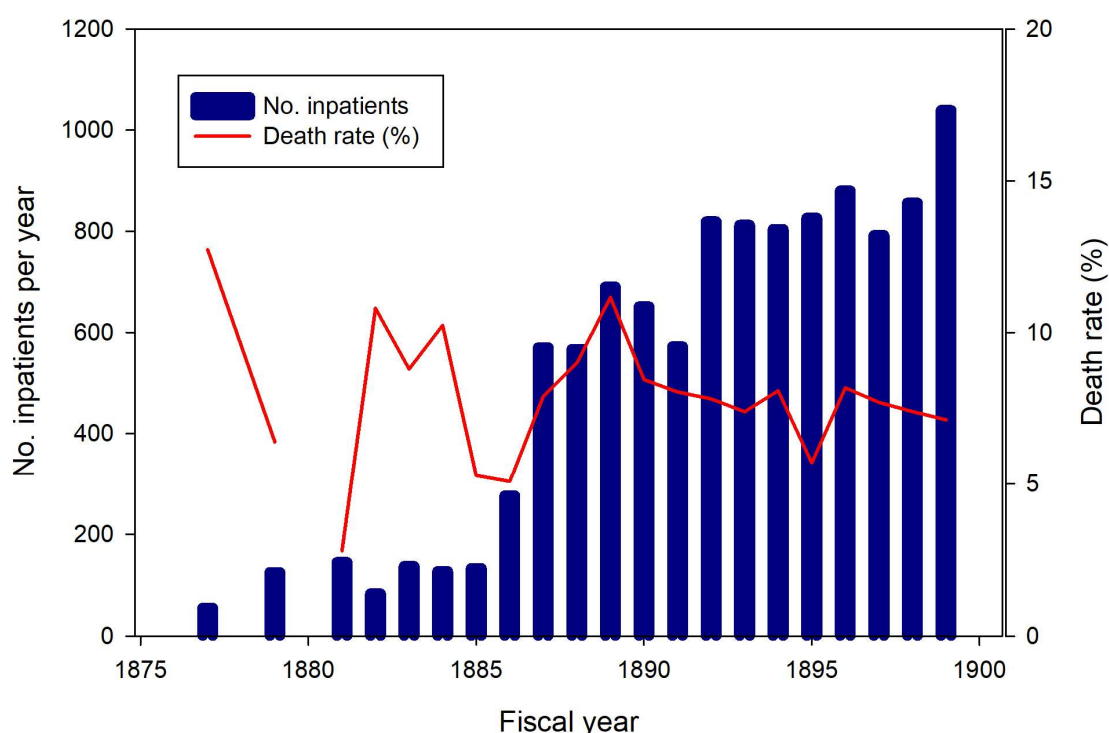


Figure 5: Numbers of inpatients and annual mortality in The Melbourne Homœopathic Hospital until 1899. Years were fiscal years 1 July to 30 June, except 1882 for a half-year; annual reports missing for some years.

The peak mortality between 1885 and 1895 corresponded with a city-wide epidemic of typhoid, with the number admitted to the hospital reaching a peak of 430 in 1890. The minutes of the annual meeting of contributors in 1889 took some pride in saying that:

the percentage of deaths was approximately only ten (lower than any other institution in the colony,) notwithstanding the fact that many of the patients were received in a moribund condition, and that the wards were so crowded that the patients were sometimes lying on the floor two deep.^{46 47}

Indeed, the claim of a lower mortality than elsewhere in the colony may have been correct. In the same year, the (allopathic) Melbourne Hospital admitted 355 patients with typhoid with a mortality of 20.3 percent,^{48 49} comparable to what it had been in 1870.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ There were 43 deaths from 415 typhoid patients admitted.

⁴⁷ Minutes of the 21st annual meeting of the contributors to the Homœopathic Hospital Melbourne. Included in: Hospital Minute Books (Note 15). 29 Jul 1889.

⁴⁸ Annual Report of the Committee of Management of the Melbourne Hospital for 1889. Melbourne: FW Niven & Co. p.10.

⁴⁹ The difference in mortality was statistically significant: $p < 0.001$, chi square 14.05.

⁵⁰ Smith F. Disputes about typhoid fever in Victoria in the 1870s. *Health and History*. 2002; 4(2): 1-18.

The historian John Schauble wrote that the death rate for typhoid in Melbourne ‘eclipsed that of most other developed cities’. It was not until 1897 that the city’s homes were first connected to a sewer.⁵¹

Why might the mortality from typhoid have been less in the Homœopathic Hospital? If bloodletting had been still prevalent in the Melbourne Hospital, that could well have accounted for the difference, but it is not clear that phlebotomy was still used at that time. Perhaps more likely is that the Homœopathic Hospital, despite the comment that many patients were ‘moribund’, may have been less willing to accept gravely ill patients. The Rules of the hospital were specific that sick persons might be admitted ‘if the Physician or Surgeon of the week report that such person is *likely to receive benefit* by treatment in the Hospital ... [this author’s emphasis]’.⁵²

In 1895, a further rule that was more restrictive was published: ‘No lunatic, or person suffering from any contagious or incurable disease, or chronic epilepsy, or pregnant women for purpose of confinement shall be deemed a proper person for admission’. Indeed, the Honorary Medical Staff were taken to task, and asked to explain to the Board, several times for admitting patients that the Board considered inappropriate. For instance, Dr James Teague was criticised for admitting a patient (after the other doctor in attendance had refused it) because the patient died within 24 hours. He had ignored the ‘distinct wishes of the Board not to admit any case unless there is a reasonable hope of the patient receiving a satisfactory result’.⁵³ We can read this as a recognition by the Board of the limitations of the supposed benefits of homeopathic treatments. Dr Teague appeared before it a week later and explained that the patient ‘was at the point of death’ and that he admitted him ‘on the grounds of humanity’.⁵⁴

In keeping with disease prevalence of that era, other common conditions admitted to the hospital were phthisis (that is tuberculosis, with a high mortality rate); other infectious diseases such as pneumonia, bronchitis, influenza and erysipelas; rheumatism; endocarditis; and diseases of the uterus or vagina. Annual reports and Board minutes indicate that surgery was performed at the hospital, with tabulated cases rising from 111 in 1892 to 565 in 1899.⁵⁵ The resident medical officer, in his 1888 report, wrote ‘that the erroneous opinion formerly held by the public, that treatment in surgery was not attempted at the Homœopathic Hospital, has been dispelled ...’.⁵⁶

To what extent did the Homeopathic Hospital’s doctors actually follow Hahnemann’s therapeutic principles? There is clear evidence this was so in the first annual report of the Dispensary, where Drs Güntz and Ray discuss some of their recent patients and their treatments. One by Robert Ray read:

[A woman of 34 with dyspepsia.] Her stomach was exceedingly intolerant of the simplest food, and the pain she endured during spasmodic attempts at digestion had rendered her a pitiable object ... She was under treatment six

⁵¹ Schauble J. Not without precedent: Two centuries of public health emergencies in Victoria. *Victorian Historical Journal*. 2022; 93(2): 303-331.

⁵² Annual Report (Note 12). 1880. p.18.

⁵³ Hospital Minute Books (Note 15). 21 Jun 1882.

⁵⁴ Hospital Minute Books (Note 15). 28 Jun 1882.

⁵⁵ Annual Reports (Note 12). 1870-1899.

⁵⁶ Annual Reports (Note 12). 1888, p.12.

months, reporting herself at the end of that period as 'feeling perfectly well though a little weak.' *Arsenica* 12 [the twelfth dilution] gave valuable aid for the first month when *Nux vom.* 12 [ditto] seemed clearly indicated, doing good service ... Her nervous condition seemed finally to call for *Ignatia*, which administered in the 12th dilution, elicited the happy report given above.⁵⁷

Dr Günt documented sixteen cases, including these two examples:

A curious case of reflex pain came under notice in a woman, aged 52. The alone symptom was a most trying pain in her right thumb. Bilious congestion at the base of the brain was diagnosed. *Aconite*, 1st dilution ... was ordered with gratifying results. *Gelsenimum* 3 [3rd dilution], one drop three times a day, satisfied me that the cure was complete at the end of the third week.

...

W.W., aged 50, inmate of the Immigrants Home, for five years a victim to neuralgia and rheumatism. I began to treat him on the 6th of May with *Bryonia* and *Arnica*, both of the 3rd decimal dilution, and on the 20th he expressed himself so much better as to need no further medicine.⁵⁸

Throughout the period this paper describes, the Board employed a Dispenser, who was resident in the hospital, and who would have sourced his drugs from Martin & Pleasance Homœopathic Pharmacy at 85 Collins Street East, Melbourne. An example of a prescription dispensed by Martin & Pleasance for Dr Günt is shown in Figure 6.⁵⁹ This author's attempt to decode its notation (figure legend) was based on the 1893 publication by John Clarke, a longtime editor of *The Homeopathic World*.⁶⁰

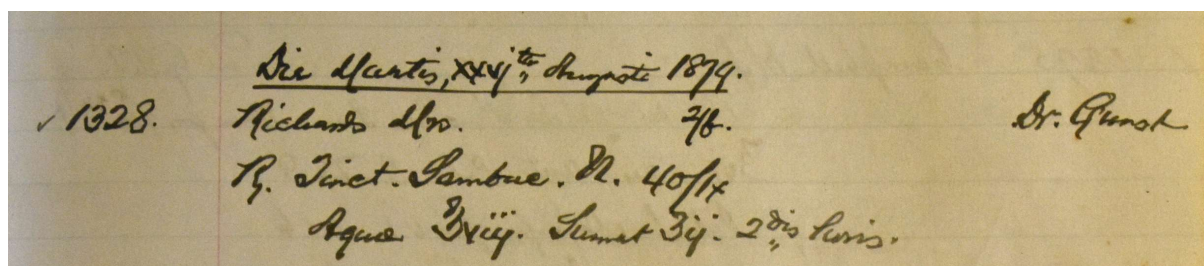


Figure 6. Entry, dated Tuesday 26 August 1879, in the prescription book of George Pleasance, Homeopathic Pharmacist, Melbourne, from a prescription written by Dr Günt. It was for tincture of *Sambucus niger*, seemingly in the 40th (but possibly the 1st) decimal dilution. See: Annual Reports (Note 12). 1870. p.8-9.

⁵⁷ Annual Reports (Note 12). 1870, p.8-9.

⁵⁸ Annual Reports (Note 12). 1870. p.10-11.

⁵⁹ From: Pleasance G. *Prescription Book 1878-1880*. Rare Books Collection, State Library Victoria, MS10674.

⁶⁰ Clarke JH. *The Prescriber: A Dictionary of the New Therapeutics*. 4th ed. London: Keene & Ashwell; 1893. p.10-12 & 22.

We can assume that the pharmacopeia used during the rest of the century was more or less homeopathic, though occasionally the doctors were chided or investigated for 'mixed prescribing'. All of the doctors except the graduates of Boston University mentioned above had been conventionally trained, mostly in the UK, so although details of their prescribing are unfortunately missing, it is not surprising that they appeared to fall back on conventional remedies from time to time. In 1882, the Board moved a resolution to dismiss Dr George Teague (a University of Melbourne graduate) for 'having departed from practice of homoeopathy'. Dr Teague resigned the following week.⁶¹ Two years later, Dr Murray was reported for 'providing mixed prescriptions together with others of 'doubtful character'.⁶²

Other examples of the hospital board's commitment to homeopathic 'purity' were the vetting they undertook before making some of the honorary staff appointments. Dr Maffey, when being considered for appointment as Honorary Surgeon, wrote 'stating his belief in the law of similars and his intention to practise in accordance therewith ...'.⁶³ When Dr Seelenmeyer resigned, he wrote to recommend the appointment of Drs Scott and Wisenwould to outpatients, saying that 'he believed both were consistent homœopathic prescribers'.⁶⁴ When Dr Warren was being considered for his honorary appointment, he certified 'that it was his intention to strictly confine himself to the practice of homœopathy ... in the discharge of his duties as Honorary Surgeon to the Hospital'.⁶⁵ The Board was content to pay, however, for 'Medical Comforts' (e.g. alcohol, milk and beef extracts),⁶⁶ though they were sometimes concerned by the cost.⁶⁷ These were clearly not homeopathic treatments, and neither of course was surgery.

Furthermore, mention in the minutes about the purchase of ether and chloroform indicate that surgery was performed using conventional anaesthesia of the day. Indeed it would be amazing if patients allowed themselves to be submitted to surgery without these agents at a time when they had become mainstream to practise elsewhere in the city. Perhaps the more effective of the non-homeopathic treatments that the hospital provided was through the care of its nursing staff who were well trained (by the honoraries) in anatomy, physiology and general nursing.⁶⁸

The Hospital in the twentieth century

This paper concerns homeopathy in the nineteenth century, but it is worth commenting on the subsequent history of Melbourne's homeopathic hospital. As it moved into the twentieth century, the therapeutics it practised became more and more mainstream, such that in 1934, by decree from King George V, it changed its name to Prince Henry's

⁶¹ Hospital Minute Books (Note 15). 19 & 26 Apr 1882.

⁶² Hospital Minute Books (Note 15). 19 Nov 1884.

⁶³ Hospital Minute Books (Note 15). 24 Jan 1883.

⁶⁴ Hospital Minute Books (Note 15). 21 Feb 1894.

⁶⁵ Hospital Minute Books (Note 15). 18 Apr 1894.

⁶⁶ Guly H. Medical comforts during the heroic age of Antarctic exploration. *Polar Record*. 2013; 49(2): 110-117.

⁶⁷ Hospital Minute Books (Note 15). 15 Feb 1893.

⁶⁸ Hospital Minute Books (Note 15). 18 Jul 1887.

Hospital. Further evidence of its acceptance into medical orthodoxy was its affiliation with The University of Melbourne in 1952 as one of the clinical schools for its Faculty of Medicine, then in 1962 it changed allegiance to become a clinical school for the new School of Medicine at Monash University.^{69 70}

Homeopathy in the other Australian colonies

This paper has focused on the development of homeopathy in the southern colony of Victoria, but it also got a foothold in each of the other colonies. The historical researcher Barbara Armstrong maintains a website which extensively documents the people, the hospitals and the dispensaries that contributed.⁷¹

Tao Bak, a Melbourne historian, has written about the ‘large and increasing portion of the population’ who had embraced homeopathic treatment in New South Wales, and noted that a Homeopathic Dispensary was created in Sydney in 1858 but it soon folded for lack of funds.⁷² However, a homeopathic hospital was eventually opened in Sydney in 1902; Armstrong wrote that ‘it is believed that the use of homeopathic treatment’ there had effectively ended by 1945.⁷³

A homeopathic hospital also opened in Hobart, Tasmania, but not until 1899.⁷⁴ In 1930 it was taken over by the Anglican Church, having run into difficulties; it was renamed St John’s Hospital in 1932 and is no longer homeopathic.⁷⁵

The allopaths fight back

As in many other parts of the world where homeopathy was thriving, the ‘regular’ medical profession – trained in medicine that was gradually becoming more scientific and evidence-based – campaigned against the homeopaths. In Melbourne, 242 subscribers to the non-homeopathic Melbourne Hospital signed a requisition in 1873 asking for a ward to be set aside ‘for the reception of such patients as desired to be treated Homœopathically’.⁷⁶ The request was not met favourably. The Melbourne Hospital Committee convened on 30 September that year and passed the following resolution reported in a daily newspaper:

⁶⁹ Templeton. *Prince Henry’s*, 1969 (Note 5). p.167 & 184.

⁷⁰ In 1994, the hospital was demolished and its staff and patients moved to the new Monash University teaching hospital in the Melbourne suburb, Clayton.

⁷¹ Armstrong. History (Note 14).

⁷² Bak T. Homeopathy and the defence of medical pluralism in nineteenth-century New South Wales. *Health and History*. 2017; 19(1): 1-19.

⁷³ Armstrong. History (Note 14). See: Hospitals.

⁷⁴ Anon. *Cyclopaedia of Tasmania: an historical and commercial review*. Hobart: Maitland and Krone; 1900. p.221.

⁷⁵ Armstrong. History (Note 14). See: Hobart Homœopathic Hospital.

⁷⁶ Annual Reports (Note 12). 1873. p.5.

That the admission of the practice of homœopathy to the hospital would totally alter its standing as a school [of the University of Melbourne] for the teaching the science of medicine, as in case it were admitted as a practice, no school or college in the United Kingdom would recognise its teachings; and consequently, all the time spent by students of medicine in the hospital would be wasted, and their money spent in vain.⁷⁷

A similar battle over access of homeopathic treatments and homeopathists to the Sydney Infirmary was also lost a few years later.⁷⁸

James Jamieson (1840-1916),⁷⁹ a graduate of the University of Glasgow and lecturer at The University of Melbourne (which conferred him MD *ad eundum gradum*), published a thoughtful book on the claims of homeopathy soon after the Melbourne Homœopathic Dispensary opened. Some of his observations are reproduced here:

Homeopathists have ceased to submit their claims to the medical profession for adjudicating, and have appealed to a popular audience, and are trying, by means of *ex parte* statements and clap-trap appeals, to secure their support ...

[Homeopaths] are guided by one well defined principle ... *similia similibus curantur*, like cures like ... The principle is to all appearances clear and simple. No minute knowledge of the human body in health and in disease is required for putting it into practice.

On the whole ... homeopathy does not fulfil its high pretensions. Its so-called law is incapable of general application ... Its strength in the popular estimation is, that it treats everything, and as many diseases tend naturally to recovery, it is constantly working cures.⁸⁰

Battles between supporters of homeopathy and the ‘regular’ medical profession also played out in two of the colonial parliaments. On 22 January 1858, Dr Thomas Embling, a Member of the Victorian Legislative Assembly (MLA), gave notice that he would move to introduce a Bill ‘for the better regulation of the Professions of Medicine and Surgery in the colony of Victoria.’ He argued that the public needed protection from irregular medical practitioners (such as the homeopathists). One of the provisions of the Bill was that only regularly qualified medical practitioners would be allowed to sign death certificates. His speech, in moving the second reading of his medical bill read in part:

⁷⁷ Anon. Melbourne Hospital. *The Argus Supplement* (Melbourne, Vic.). 1 Oct 1873. p.1.

⁷⁸ Anon. Homœopathy in the City Hospital. *The Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW). 25 Feb 1881. p.6.

⁷⁹ Dunstan D. *Jamieson, James (1840-1916)*. Australian Dictionary of Biography. <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/jamieson-james-13004> (accessed 16 Oct 2025).

⁸⁰ Jamieson J. *Homoeopathy: Its Claims and Its Fallacies*. Melbourne: Stillwell and Knight; 1874. p.5, 7 & 20.

The medical profession in this colony was suffered to exist, but was not dealt with under the protection of the law. At present there was no law which would compel a medical man to produce his diploma, and the consequence was, that in all directions in these colonies *soi-disant* [self-styled] medical men were to be met with, who too frequently dealt with the health and lives of the public. The Medical Board of Victoria had no power to compel medical men to register their qualifications; it had, in fact, no positive powers at all: all its powers were negative. There was no telling a medical man, therefore; and in case of sudden illness the husband or father might run to where he saw a light over the door. And that light might only be evidence of the destroyer within. There were repeated deaths inflicted by such men from want of skill—they were murders under the sanction of the law.⁸¹

His fellow MLA, Dr John Owens, responded that he ‘had great pleasure in supporting this Bill, which would protect the public against the actions of charletans [sic].’ A third medical MLA, Dr Augustus Greeves, ‘said that all the protection asked by the medical profession was that those who were not duly qualified should not be allowed to practice [sic], and so injure the public.’⁸²

Two weeks later, a petition was tabled by Richard Heales MLA in the Assembly, ‘signed by the Hon. J. Fawkner [member of Legislative Council], Professor Irving [Professor of Classical Philology and Logic at University of Melbourne], and other gentlemen, against the Medical Practitioners Bill now before the House’.⁸³ ⁸⁴ In May of that year, the Bill underwent extensive and sometimes acrimonious debate. Heales proposed an amendment ‘that nothing in the Act contained shall be construed to apply to or interfere with any person who may now or hereafter practise the medical system of homœopathy.’⁸⁵ His amendment was narrowly lost. The Bill eventually lapsed after being sent to Committee.

In 1862, there was a more successful action in the Victorian colonial parliament, again driven by two medical members of the Legislative Assembly – Dr Louis Smith and Dr John Macada – which resulted in the Medical Practitioners Act mentioned above.⁸⁶ During its passage, an attempt to have read a petition by homeopathic practitioners was summarily rejected by the Assembly. This Act provided penalties for a person not registered under the Act ‘to pretend to be or to take or use the name or title of a physician doctor of medicine ... surgeon ... apothecary or accoucheur ...’.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, this Act did not prevent the practice of homeopathy in the homeopathic hospitals of the late nineteenth century, where most of the practitioners had been conventionally trained and qualified.

⁸¹ Embling T. *Victorian Hansard*. 13 Apr 1858. p.360, column 1.

⁸² Owens J, Greeves A. *Victorian Hansard*. 13 Apr 1858. p.360, column 2.

⁸³ Fendley GC. *Irving, Martin Howy (1831–1912)*. Australian Dictionary of Biography. <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/irving-martin-howy-3840> (accessed 16 Oct 2025).

⁸⁴ Heales R. *Victorian Hansard*. 27 Apr 1858. p.420.

⁸⁵ Heales R. *Victorian Hansard*. 21 May 1858. p. 491.

⁸⁶ Macadam J, Smith L. *Victorian Hansard*. 13 Feb 1862. p.608.

⁸⁷ Medical Practitioners Act of 1862 (25 Vict. No. 158). Sect. VII.

New South Wales in the nineteenth century was very much a free market colony, and there the attempts of the orthodox medical profession to reign in the 'irregulars' took longer to succeed, despite the efforts of several medical members of the Parliament. It was not until the Medical Practitioners Amendment Act 1900 (NSW) was finally passed that New South Wales doctors could exclusively call themselves medical practitioners.⁸⁸

Conclusion

Homeopathy spread quite quickly from Britain to Australia in the second half of the nineteenth century as the colonies continued to fill with British migrants. This was a time when there was no medical school in the country until the University of Melbourne started to take students in 1862, and it was a quarter of a century later that medical graduates started to emerge from the Universities of Sydney and Adelaide.⁸⁹ It is not surprising, perhaps, that homeopathy got quite a firm footing in the community.

As mentioned earlier, the Melbourne homeopathic hospital got high level support: patronage by successive colonial governors, members of its Board from the upper echelons of Melbourne society, funding by the colonial government, and large numbers of contributors. Its beds were filled to overflowing, especially during the typhoid epidemic. It seems certain that some of the attraction of homeopathy was its perceived gentleness in contrast to the more unpleasant therapies of nineteenth-century regular physicians, including their use of emetics and purgatives.⁹⁰

The regular doctors tried hard to assert their superior credentials, and some examples have been discussed: repulsing attempts to have homeopathic wards added to other Melbourne and Sydney hospitals, and the efforts of medical members of colonial parliaments to legislate protections for regular doctors and sanctions against the quacks.

This was a fascinating period in medicine world-wide, and even now the merits of a scientific and evidence-based methodology for treating patients' ailments continue to be challenged by certain sections of society, perhaps because some alternative practitioners give their patients more time and a more 'holistic' offering.

⁸⁸ Yeomans N. *A History of Australia's Immigrant Doctors, 1838-2021: Colonial Beginnings, Contemporary Challenges*. PhD Thesis, University of Melbourne, 2022. p.102-103.

⁸⁹ Yeomans. *History of Australia's Immigrant Doctors*, 2022 (Note 88). p.20.

⁹⁰ Gundling KE. When did I become an "allopath"? *Archives of Internal Medicine*. 1998; 158(20): 2185-86.

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