

Wonthaggi Miners' Friendly Society Dispensary

by C.Landon

Only One of Its Kind

There are dispensaries everywhere in Australia, but none are like the one we have in Wonthaggi, which has no association with any other Friendly Society including the Victorian United Friendly Societies' Dispensaries. There is something about Wonthaggi that allows an organisation whose profits are given back to its members – the people it serves – to thrive even today where others decline.

It has to do with the very foundations of this town, based as they are on collective decision making through vibrant meetings – at the Co-op, the Hospital, the Union Theatre, the Women's Auxiliary, the Unions themselves – co-operative ownership, profit sharing, and a strong sense of social justice. There is a moral standard here that still exists even though the tough times of coal mining are long gone, that no one gets left without. Certainly the Co-op operated on such a philosophy, as did the Hospital, which was owned and run by the people of the town. The Dispensary was no different. No one did without pharmaceuticals or dental care if they needed them. If the Co-op and the unique organisation of the hospital has faded away, the Dispensary is still going strong.

Political Philosophy Plays a Role

A.F.Opie, former secretary of the Wonthaggi MFS Dispensary, explained in a letter to a researcher from ANU that, “the Miners' Dispensary evolved as a natural phenomenon from the epic struggles of the mining peoples for justice. Firstly, they fought for sufficient food to exist and then regulations to enforce better working conditions. The principals of the Eureka Stockade were handed down to the early gold miners who came to work the black coal seams of Korumburra, Outtrim, Jumbuna and

Wonthaggi. Later, miners who were forced to leave the coal fields of the United Kingdom re-inforced [*sic*] those principals with new radical ideas of the day.”

He goes on to say that political philosophy played an important role in the foundation of the dispensary as it did in all the institutions developed in Wonthaggi, from the Co-op to the Hospital to the socialistic Sunday school (“the first is Australia”).

Influenza Epidemic Gives Rise to Demand

He also sites events after the Great War (1914-1918) giving rise to demand for a dispensary. The influenza epidemic after the war “took a heavy toll of the miners and their families. The hospital was overcrowded. Practically, the main ward was constantly required for the care of injured mine

workers. Medical supplies were scarce. The inadequacy and the irregularity of supply caused concern to the miners because of family responsibility. In contrast, many returned soldiers from the war were back in the pits working beside their fathers and brothers. To the miners, it appeared that repatriation benefits flowed quite freely when required by the less fortunate returned men.

“This was then something of the atmosphere prevailing at a general meeting of the members of the Miners Union held in 1920 – not specifically called to deal with medical problems of the time – but the meeting was impelled to listen to many individual complaints regarding medical matter, when a voice from the body of the hall shouted, ‘Why don't we start our own chemist shop?’”



Levies of Three-pence a Week

According to Alan Henry, who started as an engineer in the State Coal Mine in 1912, the idea for a dispensary came from the miner's union members, and a representative from each of the six mine unions gathered to officially discuss the idea. Mr Henry represented the Amalgamated Engineers. "We unanimously decided to go ahead with the idea for we realised the enormous benefits. I was appointed to a sub-committee to get things moving. We bought a shambles of a building at 165 Graham Street for less than £1000. The money for the land and erection of the building came through levies of thr'pence a week on employees at the Coal Mines. The old building, which had been a photographic business, had to be pulled down. The Wonthaggi Miners' Friendly Society's Dispensary was founded in 1920 and opened for business two years later."

Mr Henry went on to become the secretary of the Dispensary and later the President.

Dental Clinic Established in 1927

When things are established by committee, a great deal of talk takes place before anything happens. On 8th January 1927, the Federated Engine Drivers discussed the formation of a Dental Clinic to be connected to the Dispensary, which had been going from strength to strength for five years. After debate it was resolved that a protest be forwarded to the Dispensary Committee that "we object to contributions being deducted at mine for such purposes at present." This resolution was amended by a decision to appoint a "committee of three [Mr. Davey, Mr. Harris and Mr. Solmon] to wait on the Dispensary Management for information and report back to subsequent a meeting."

On the 29th January, these three gentlemen returned to the Engine Drivers to report everything above board and done properly according to the Friendly Society's Act and was for the "health benefit of the community." They reported that the Dispensary agreed that "Should any employee object, he need not contribute to the clinic." However, it came to light, in the meeting that "such payment would be compulsory in accordance with the terms of employment."

The dental clinic was opened for business in 1927. It cost a total of £23/5-0 a week to run. Its first dental surgeon was Mr.

Meredith, who was paid £12 per week. Along with him came a mechanic at £7 a week.

In the first year it was open the Dental Clinic made 5000 dentures. Mr Henry was given his in that year and fifty-five years later, in 1982, he opened his mouth for the *South Gippsland Sentinel Times* reporter and said, "See these? The little beauties were the second set of dentures made at the clinic. In almost sixty years they've never let me down. How's that for great workmanship? Not bad. Not bad at all."

Connection with Hospital

Before 1930, the hospital and the dispensary each had their own part time secretaries, but in that year, with the dispensary running at a good profit and the hospital finding it difficult to meet costs, it was proposed that the job of secretary be amalgamated and turned into a full-time job at £400 per year. The new secretary would be in charge of both the hospital and the dispensary. The two organisations would share the share the cost, "according to the mount of time that the proposed secretary would dedicate to each institution." Unfortunately, this never eventuated because it turned out to be legally impossible since the two organisations were under different stat acts. It would take "an act of Parliament to make the proposal possible".



