



Adelaide Sanitarium, 1909
Photo courtesy of South Pacific Heritage Centre.

Adelaide Electro-Hydropathic Institute and Sanitarium

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The Adelaide Electro-Hydropathic Institute and Sanitarium was opened in July 1899, the brainchild of Alfred Semmens. It existed for ten years as a struggling institution until it was superseded by the Adelaide Sanitarium which was opened at another site in 1908.

Electro-Hydropathic Institute

When the Australasian Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association Board met in Cooranbong, New South Wales (NSW), in March 1899, it was voted that Alfred and Emma Semmens transfer from the Summer Hill Sanitarium in Sydney and pioneer medical missionary work in Adelaide.¹ These Australians were trained nurses from the Battle

Creek Sanitarium, the flagship Seventh-day Adventist medical institution in Michigan, United States of America. Emma's sister, Mary Pallant, went as an assistant nurse. Louis Currow was assigned to help male patients? The secondment was to last six months, but it extended to eight years.³

Alfred Semmens leased a former auction market fronting Victoria Square in the heart of Adelaide. With donations and volunteer labor from church members, the building was renovated and readied for hydrotherapy treatments, opening in late July 1899. The facility included a waiting room, consulting room, 12 dressing rooms, 8 massage rooms, 2 bath rooms, 4 hot and cold shower rooms, an electric bath room, a Swedish manual movement room, and 1 room for an overnight client. Their sales pitch offered "Health Foods such as Granola, Granose, Nuttose, Bromose, Caramel Cereal, Nut Butter, and Antiseptic Tablets for constipation."⁴

From the start, the majority of local medical professionals opposed the institution and would not make referrals. It was a curious situation as Semmens was critical of medical doctors who used drug remedies while at the same time, he was seeking their endorsement of his treatments. Eventually, opposition faded⁵ due in part to good results from treatments and also to the 1903 appointment of Semmens to the Adelaide Hospital as an honorary lecturer in the medical practice of massage.⁶

At the conclusion of its first year of operation, the institution retained a debit balance of £88.⁷ The following three years saw credit balances of £92, £40, and £22.⁸ By 1905, after more than five years of operation, Semmens reported a net gain of £227. In the same period, 16,711 paid treatments were given together with 1,548 free treatments.⁹

Alfred Semmens lamented the fact that he was sometimes called on to administer the South Australian Conference when its president was absent. He was also utilized in the conference treasury.¹⁰ Furthermore, he repeatedly advised the need for a full-fledged sanitarium with a resident Seventh-day Adventist doctor.¹¹ By 1907 the Institute was struggling financially.¹² However, plans were already underway for a sanitarium in Wahroonga, and Semmens was transferred at the end of the year to be medical secretary for the Australasian Union Conference at Wahroonga, NSW.¹³

Charles and Beatrice Baron managed the institute for a time after Semmens left,¹⁴ and William and Mary Symonds arrived to do the nursing. Dr. Howard James began a term as the resident medical practitioner.¹⁵

Adelaide Sanitarium

While the institute was still functional, the South Australian Conference purchased land on Barker Road, Prospect, to the north of the city. Two cottages were built and fitted as a sanitarium with the understanding that if the venture proved to be a failure, the cottages would be sold as residences. The official opening was August 3, 1908, but a few patients had been admitted earlier.¹⁶

One cottage served as a ward for about 12 patients. The second cottage contained the reception room, a kitchen, nurse's amenities, and general treatment rooms, including one that was adapted as a small operating room. The management hoped to attract clients from interstate and planned to refer some to the sanitarium at Wahroonga. Dr. James believed "that when the Sanitarium is fully established my time will be well occupied between the Institute, the Sanitarium, and the outside private work."¹⁷

Within a year of the sanitarium opening, the Hydropathic Institute was closed because of mounting debts. One-third of the debt was transferred to the South Australian Conference, and the remainder was shared between the other conferences within Australia.¹⁸

In the two years to approximately August 1910, the head nurse at the sanitarium, Esther Macdonald, reported 89 inpatients and 120 outpatients. This did not meet expectations and was not enough to warrant the continuance of Dr. James. He transferred to the Warburton Sanitarium in Victoria. Prior to leaving, he arranged for a local doctor to assist, but this plan proved to be unsatisfactory.¹⁹

Macdonald continued to give hydrotherapy treatments. In 1914 she married William Clapp, the institution's maintenance man.²⁰ During the quadrennium 1911–1914, the enterprise showed a net profit of £166.²¹ The South Australian Conference continued to administer the institution with an appointed board that included Macdonald.²² Assistant nurses from the Sydney Sanitarium were supplied until at least 1919.²³

William and Esther Clapp purchased the enterprise about 1920, and it morphed into a successful nursing home under their direction. Long after the deal, even into the 1930s, it was still referred to as the Adelaide Sanitarium²⁴ and Esther Clapp continued to be issued with a medical missionary licentiate from the South Australian Conference.²⁵

Retrospect

The concept of small sanitariums in major cities was admirable, but financial security depended on a steady supply of clients from the middle and upper classes. This did not eventuate in Adelaide. Furthermore, despite the efforts of Semmens to counter criticism from the medical fraternity, he never convinced a sufficient number of medical practitioners to put their trust in medicine without drugs.

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