



Warburton Hospital and Health Centre, c. 1985

Photo courtesy of Adventist Heritage Centre.

Warburton Sanitarium and Hospital

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The Warburton Sanitarium and Hospital operated under a number of names for 91 years between 1910 and 2001. It commenced as a health home and was sold in 2001 as a hospital and health resort.

A Small Beginning

With the successful establishment of the Sydney Sanitarium in 1903, the Australasian Union Conference (AUC) believed it was advisable to open a smaller enterprise in Victoria. An opportunity presented itself when the

manager of the Signs Publishing Company, Wilbur Salisbury, transferred from Australia, and his imposing home in Warburton became vacant. The AUC rented it and spent £200 on adaptations and equipment to fit it out as the Warburton Sanitarium Home. The third quarter's Sabbath School offerings were used to pay this expense. No electricity was connected to the home. An ordinary boiler provided hot water that was carried in a bucket to the bathroom for hydrotherapy treatments.¹ Under these humble circumstances the institution was opened in August 1910 with three or four patients. It had the capacity for only five patients.² Dr. Howard James began a twenty-year association with the facility as medical superintendent. Christine Manson,³ followed by Matilda Voss,⁴ both graduate nurses of Sydney Sanitarium, served during the first five years of treatments.

Better Facilities

While treatments continued under the primitive conditions in Salisbury's former home, builders were busy on a much larger two-story facility. It was located on the slope of a hill and circled by a road that gave access at the rear to the top story, where the bedrooms were situated and the lower floor was accessed at the front. The lower floor was reserved for midwifery patients, hydrotherapy, nurses' quarters, doctor's office, kitchen, and dining room. Electricity was installed, making it an impressive sight when lit up at night on the hillside. It was opened in the Christmas week of 1911, carrying the shortened title Warburton Sanitarium.⁵ Almost immediately it was found to be too small, so its size was increased to include better toilet utilities, two separate treatment rooms, and an operating theater. These were functional in 1914, better able to care for a capacity of thirty patients.⁶

During the first decade Dr. James managed both the medical and business affairs, having a governing board of five men drawn from local church members. The following few years witnessed a succession of business managers to assist Dr. James. They were Thomas Dowling (1920), Johan Johanson (1921–1923), John Simpson (1924–1925), Hector Franks (1926, 1928–1931) and Walter Johanson (1927).

The Sherwin Era

Dr. Thomas Sherwin was appointed to the Warburton Sanitarium in 1932 and remained until 1945. Additions were made to the building, and the bed capacity almost doubled to 52. It became known as the Warburton Hydro and Hospital, or, affectionately, the Hydro.⁷ Sherwin functioned without the assistance of business managers⁸ and was able to reverse annual losses of hundreds of pounds to handsome profits of several thousands of pounds annually.⁹ It is thought Sherwin's wife, Dr. Margherita Freeman, in private practice in Melbourne, probably recommended the Hydro to many of her patients.

Increasing Growth

The Hydro became well known among Melbournians as a resort in the hills where the stresses of a busy business schedule could be alleviated with rest and hydrotherapy. The leading resident physicians who succeeded Sherwin were Dr. Brian Reynolds (1946–1948),¹⁰ Dr. C. W. Hammond (1949),¹¹ Dr. Gilbert McLaren (1950–1952, 1961–1965),¹² Dr. Calvin Palmer (1953–1959),¹³ Dr. Raymond Chapman (1960),¹⁴ and Dr. Errol Thrift (1966–1988).¹⁵ Thrift's long tenure is understood in the context of his medical speciality, the treatment of various types of arthritis, and the benefits achieved with hydrotherapy and physiotherapy for these ailments. He was fortunate to have Stan Liljdahl¹⁶ and later Paul Frijlink¹⁷ on the staff, both excellent physiotherapists.

One regular guest, Barkley Bell, donated generously to the institution, enabling the construction of a four-story wing that was opened in 1962. It was named after him.¹⁸ Bed capacity rose to one hundred and a group of twenty church leaders formed the board of directors.¹⁹ It was the heyday of the institution. A number of paramedical staff were added at different times. Dentistry was the only one offered in the 1950s;²⁰ but by the 1970s the staff included a health educator, radiologist, pharmacist, dietitian, laboratory technician, occupational therapist, and a chaplain.²¹ When, in 1986, an alcohol recovery unit was introduced, a clinical psychologist was also employed.²²

A specialized health education wing was opened in 1978, providing a lecture room, gymnasium, and heated swimming pool. By that time preventive medicine had begun to be a leading feature of the institution, and its name was adapted to Warburton Health Care and Hospital, but in 1992 reverted to Warburton Hospital. This later move was indicative of a return to shape the enterprise as one offering both preventative and surgical strategies once again. An A\$5 million building expansion program commenced, including a new three-story wing to house medical, surgical, and obstetric wards, expanded radiology and pathology facilities, an emergency department, a modern operating suite, and a day surgery. It was officially opened on June 7, 1994, despite the fact that A\$600,000 was needed to complete the outfitting and purchase of surgical equipment. It had been financed by a A\$3 million grant and a A\$2 million loan from the South Pacific Division.²³

The practice of preventive medicine continued under the new name of Warburton Health Resort. Lifestyle programs such as strategies to stop smoking, weight loss plans, and stress management techniques were conducted. These were held in conjunction with the ongoing hydrotherapy treatments.²⁴ A respite unit was also opened for mothers who cared for disabled children.²⁵

Difficulties

At the opening of the new wing in 1994 the chair of the Warburton Hospital board, Desmond Hills, remarked, "Our plan is to enter the twenty-first century as an accredited premium health institution. The best days of the institutional [*sic*] life lie in the future."²⁶ It was not to be. Even though the enterprise was highly regarded by the public, was well patronized and fully accredited, the chief executive officer, Donald Bain, wrestled with mounting operational costs. There were also some short-term staffing problems, especially enlisting suitable medical

practitioners.²⁷ Matters deteriorated to the point where, in 1998, the hospital board lost the will to keep subsidizing the hospital, and it voted to sell. After almost three years of searching for a buyer, a sale was made to Prospa Pty., Ltd., in September 2000, and the hospital closed on March 14, 2001.²⁸

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