

Maverick female war doctors battled exclusion

Carolyn Webb

During World War I, Australian women doctors who sought to enlist were rebuffed. Male army chiefs believed war was no place for a woman, and that their medical skills were not up to it.

Young Melbourne surgeon Vera Scantlebury was one of about 20 mavericks who made their own way overseas. She worked for two years at Endell Street Military Hospital in London's Covent Garden, most of whose 180 staff were women.

Before the war at Melbourne's Children's Hospital she treated broken legs, tonsils and appendixes. In London Dr Scantlebury faced catastrophic cases from the front, performing amputations, removing shrapnel and treating rampant disease and infections.

Perhaps to debrief, Dr Scantlebury wrote 3000 pages of letters to her parents in the Melbourne suburb of Cheltenham, now in the University of Melbourne archives.

Historian Heather Sheard said Dr Scantlebury had "a strong desire to do her duty, she wanted to help the soldiers, and the side issue was to demonstrate that women could do these things", but was overwhelmed at first by the onslaught of cases.

With this year the centenary of the start of World War I, Dr Sheard, who did her PhD on the life of Dr Scantlebury (surname Scantlebury Brown after her 1926 marriage), wants the Australian War Memorial to erect an honour board for World War I female doctors, and is writing a book about them.

On Wednesday at the Shrine of Remembrance, Dr Sheard will give a talk about Dr Scantlebury and two other World War I women doctors:



pathologist Dr Elsie Dalyell, a "brilliant" Sydney pathologist who worked

in Serbia, France, Malta and Greece, and Dr Agnes Bennett, also from Sydney, who treated wounded soldiers from Gallipoli in Egypt and later headed a field hospital in Serbia.

Dr Sheard, a retired secondary school teacher, first heard of Dr Scantlebury Brown through the latter's post-war work. Dr Sheard was curious about the history of the free infant welfare centres dotted across Melbourne

and Victorian towns, which four generations of her own family has used. Dr Sheard wrote a 2007 book on their history called *All The Little Children*.

Dr Sheard discovered that Dr Scantlebury Brown oversaw the set-up of more than 250 of the free centres, which promoted breastfeeding, hygiene and vaccination, and identified infant disease and malnutrition.

On Dr Scantlebury's return to Melbourne in 1919, the male medical establishment thwarted her desire to be a paediatrician. Instead she became a medical officer in charge of city baby health centres, dashing around town in her baby Austin car. In 1926 she was appointed the first state director of in-

Tribute: Historian Heather Sheard in front of a portrait of Dr Vera Scantlebury Brown, (left) Dr Scantlebury Brown with her brother in 1918.
Photo: Eddie Jim

fant welfare, a post she held for 20 years until her death in 1946. "She was the visionary for the complete system, universal, secular and free, that we have today," Dr Sheard said.

She said Dr Scantlebury Brown must have been extremely determined to achieve what she did in her career, and should be better recognised.

Of the war work she said: "I don't think our society really values the work that those women did. I admire her enormously but I also admire her fellow doctors, like Mary De Garis, [a Victorian doctor who headed a hospital camp in remote Serbia in WWI and survived bombings, extreme cold and epidemics]. They were truly amazing women."

