

Nurse honours her heroine in new book



Photo: Yvonne Airey

Author Beryl Harris (left) and her friend and mentor Dame Cecily Pickerill (right).

“Dame Cecily operated on hundreds of babies over the years, and they often kept in touch as adults.”

Beryl Harris freely admits she is Dame Cecily Pickerill’s “one woman fan club”: “She was my first boss and went on to mentor me, and we remained friends until she died in 1988.”

A nurse of long standing in the Hutt Valley, Beryl was a 21 year old theatre nurse when she first met Dame C, working with her from 1958 to 1959 at Bassam Hospital, the eight room facility Dame Cecily and her plastic surgeon husband Professor Henry Percy Pickerill established to treat children with cleft problems.

But that’s only part of the reason why Beryl embarked on a three year mission to write her book ‘A Dame We Knew’: “I saw all the books being written about ANZACs. They talked about Henry Pickerill and his work with plastic surgeon Harold Gillies in the War, and they tacked Cecily on to that, often in a derogatory way, which made me angry.”

“Dame Cecily started in the field first as Pick’s house surgeon, then came back to reconstructive work with him in 1927 after a stint in psychiatric work, which she found was not her forte. She faced discrimination from the start. She was criticised for not being qualified but in fact there were no qualifications available for women until 1947 and she started in the field in 1935. In fact she had the best apprenticeship possible, working alongside Henry Pickerill for 25 years.”

Dame Cecily had the (radical for the time) vision of each mother being the key player in her child’s recovery, so the hospital was set up with eight ‘hostel style’ rooms that could be shared by mother and child. The couple secured funding from the then Crippled Children’s Society to cover travel and accommodation expenses for the mothers and babies. The Pickerills virtually gave their labour free, only picking up the medical schedule fee of £9 for each operation. They worked with hospitals throughout New Zealand to ensure that every family of a child born with cleft problems knew about the available service. “Dame Cecily operated on hundreds of babies over the years, and they often kept in touch as adults,” says Beryl.

Beryl drew on letters from past child patients, including Gareth Morgan, for the book and also visited doctors and archives around the country. Beryl’s abiding memory of her friend is as a “straightshooter”: “Neither of them ever went after fame and fortune but they both did so much for New Zealand.”

Contact the author for a copy of ‘A Dame We Knew’, \$40.

E: berylaharris@xtra.co.nz.



Photo: Kate Fortune.

Do you have ancestors in the Bolton Street Cemetery? Jenny Button, president of the Friends of Bolton Street Cemetery, has ancestors buried there – including Archdeacon Thomas Fancourt, the first vicar of Karori, who died 97 years ago in February 1919. Jenny is pictured taking a look at the memorial book in the little Chapel on Bolton Street, which lists everyone who was buried in the cemetery. The Chapel is open seven days, 10am to 4pm.
<http://boltoncemetery.org.nz/>.