A TRIBUTE TO AC BROWNLESS

BY ANN BROTHERS

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the establishment of the University of Melbourne. While the founding of the medical school does not reach back the full 150 years, it is evident from the Act of Incorporation that there was provision for conferring the degrees of MB and MD from 1853, and plans for a medical school were underway shortly thereafter. This was largely due to the vision and sustained efforts of Anthony Colling Brownless. Having arrived in the colony in 1852, we find Brownless already gazetted a member of the university council in 1855, and devoting his energies to this cause.

Brownless had been a distinguished student of St Bartholomew’s Hospital and in 1841 obtained the diploma of the Royal College of Surgeons and was admitted a licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries. After work in the wards of St Bartholomew’s, Brownless furthered his study of anatomy at the University of Liege, returning in 1846 to graduate MD from the University of St Andrews. It was at this time that Ellen, his wife of four years, died, leaving behind their two sons. Brownless now practised as a physician in London, while lecturing and preparing medical students for their examinations. During this time he gained repute for his series of articles Diseases of the Joints.

He was soon elected physician to the Metropolitan Dispensary and the Royal General Dispensary, two of the largest charity institutions assisting London’s poor. Accounts in 1852 commented upon: ‘his rapid rise in the estimation of the profession and of the public; his kindness of manner and great attention [which] won the hearts of his patients; and his diagnosis and successful treatment of their diseases [which] secured their confidence.’ He was also known to be devoted to his students, offering them every opportunity for clinical instruction, for which they too held him in high esteem. Then in 1848, upon the retirement of obstetrician Dr Frotheroe Smith, Brownless was unanimously elected teacher of practical midwifery at St Bartholomew’s.

It reportedly came as a great surprise, therefore, when friends learned shortly after of his intention to leave for Australia. This was in consequence of ill health, probably the recurrence of tuberculosis which followed a knee joint injury sustained in his youth. This caused him to resign his positions at the London dispensaries, about two years before leaving England in 1852. Upon his resignation from the charity hospitals, the patients, at a great gathering, presented him with a beautiful testimonial raised with their mites, accompanied by an address full of genuine feeling and homely eloquence.

The Medical History Museum is fortunate to possess a bound copy of these addresses, dated 1849, inscribed in Brownless’s hand to a favourite aunt. It also includes his response to his dispensary patients, which included the following words: ‘Your Demonstration of esteem, grateful as it would have been to me at all times, brings to my heart redoubled pleasure, now that I am assailed by some of the rich and powerful; (mark you, I say some, for many are most kind and generously supporting me) now that an attempt is being made to crush me for my support for the Poor, and devotion to the cause of Truth and Justice.’

While the meaning behind these words remains unclear, what does become evident is that Brownless’s strong sense of public service was the driving force behind his determination to see the young colony he had adopted provided with the highest possible standard of medical training and service.

Within weeks of arriving in Melbourne in December 1852, Brownless was elected physician to the Benevolent Asylum, where again his patients would have been the incurable and destitute ill. In 1854 he was elected physician to the Melbourne Hospital, where he continued in active service for twelve years.

TESTIMONIAL TO DR. BROWNLESS, PRESENTED BY HIS GRATEFUL PATIENTS WHEN HE RESIGNED FROM LONDON’S CHARITY HOSPITALS

Already a member of the council of the university, Brownless saw the foundation stone for the main university building laid on 13 May 1855, and the university formally opened in a ceremony in the Old Exhibition building, then on the site of the Old Mint, where teaching of arts subjects started right away.

In December 1856 the university council decided that preparations for the teaching of law and medicine should commence, and Redmond Barry and Anthony Brownless were requested to draft details. Within a month Brownless had submitted a ‘Scheme for the Institution of a Faculty of Medicine’, to be established before April 1857, so that all could be in place for the opening of a school of medicine on 1 May 1858. Professors and lecturers were to be appointed and salaries found for nine subjects within the university, and for clinical medicine and surgery outside the university. The sanction for the legislature was to be sought for an anatomy act to provide for the supply of bodies for dissection, and in London the advice of professors Paget and Owen was to be sought in the appointment of a threefold professor of anatomy, physiology and pathology.

It was soon realised that the fledgling university did not have funds for this comprehensive scheme, but Brownless, not to be daunted, approached the honorable chief secretary of government himself, requesting on behalf of the university council the estimated $1 200 necessary for the building and equipping of a medical school. This request met with a response from the government which was to have a familiar ring for the next seven years, before the building finally arose, ‘that the time
was not yet arrived for initiating the medical school project. The response by 1861 was even more firmly expressed, that:

'On account of the falling off in the revenue the Government cannot provide funds for establishing a Medical School, or even sustain the question of making further grants of money to the University'—all of which has a familiar resonance to this day.

Despite these rebuffs (and a suspected distaste within the university council 'to allow a dissecting room to come betwixt the wind and their corporate nobility'), Brownless continued to move ahead with plans. In 1860 Dr Shearman Ralph of the Microscopical Society was appointed to collect pathology specimens for the museum, and lengthy correspondence was entered into with Sir James Paget concerning the structure of the proposed course. Interestingly (as it turned out not to be adopted), Paget recommended a four-year course, reduced to three years if candidates had sufficient training in science. The course actually adopted was of five years, with five examinations, longer and more gruelling than that offered in the motherland.

In 1861 the Medical Society of Victoria, who had decided to start a school of their own, met with the university council and the decision was made to work with the newly formed Medical School Committee.

Advised again by the chief secretary's office in 1862 that further urgings might result in the matter being altogether rejected, Brownless redirected his pleas to the treasurer himself, for the much smaller vote of $2000, so that the portion of the building most urgently needed for anatomical purposes could at least go ahead.

With the rejection of even this modest request, a lesser man might have abandoned the cause. Brownless, undaunted, came up with a totally new suggestion for a general scheme of retrenchment of university expenditure, whereby the lecturers in law and civil engineering would give up part of their salaries to fund the maintenance of a medical school. This extraordinarily

selfless request seems to have been accepted. The professorial board could now frame regulations for the five-year MB course, and the university council announced that lectures would soon begin.

Without building or professor, the course commenced in 1862 on a more modest scale. Dr John Macadam, public analyst and health officer for the City of Melbourne, was appointed lecturer in chemistry and began his classes on 3 March, in his own laboratory behind the public library, with his own apparatus and materials. It was here, after such a protracted but determined struggle spearheaded by Brownless, that the first enrolled medical students—Patrick Maloney, William Rees and Alexander Mackie—commenced the first year of the MB.

Steps then had to be taken to choose the professor of anatomy, pathology and physiology, which on the advice of professors Paget and Owen resulted in the appointment of George Britton Halford. Yet in October 1862, with Halford on his way to take up his position, there was still no building in which the professor could conduct his classes. The council, determined that classes be held as promised, made arrangements for the erection of a shed (or possibly the clearing out of an existing left) at the back of Halford's rented premises. It was here in 1863 that the first dissecting class took place, and the three students could proceed with the second year of their course, supplemented with lectures in materia medica, therapeutics and medical botany, provided by Dr Richard Eagles.

This pattern of pushing the project forward without waiting for 'due process' or infrastructure to be in place seems to have been the strategy adopted by Brownless in the face of setback and opposition. Eventually, in August 1863, the chancellor was instructed that the expenditure of $6000 for the additions to Melbourne University had been approved. The building was completed in May 1864 and celebrated as a significant milestone for the medical school.

While much more could be told of the school's early years, in closing this tribute to Brownless we acknowledge his great service in the realisation of the Melbourne medical school. Following his death, in December 1897, the by then chancellor, Sir Anthony Colling Brownless, was accorded a university funeral. Amongst his many tributes was a special medical supplement to Alma Mater in September 1899, acknowledging his life in which so much energy was directed towards the establishment of the school. His long years in this cause enabled him to see the fruit of his labours: a medical school, fully equipped and recognised, with 250 students and graduates scattered in honourable positions throughout Australia, and shortly throughout the world.

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4. Testimonial to Dr Brownless by his grateful Patients and His Address in Acknowledgment of their Kindness, London, 1849, p.15.
6. Chief secretary's office to the registrar, Registrar's Correspondences—Medical School, Sept 1861, UM 419, No. 299, MUA.
7. Neil, JE. 'The Medical School of the Melbourne University, an Address delivered on the 25th Anniversary of the Opening of the Medical School, in the Wilson Hall, March 23 1887', in Pamphlets—Neil, (collected addresses 1867-1887).
8. AC Brownless to the registrar (concerning the landlord Smithers, and the removal of plants fromloth), 17 Nov 1862, Registrar's Correspondence Medical School, UM 419, No. 380, MUA.