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CONTACT THE MJA

AMPCo House, 277 Clarence Street, Sydney,
NSW 2000. ABN 20 000 005 854.
Post: The MJA, Locked Bag 3030, Strawberry Hills,
NSW 2012. Tel: (02) 9562 6666. Fax: (02) 9562 6699.
mja@mja.com.au

INSTRUCTIONS TO AUTHORS: <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/mja-instructions-authors>

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Advertising Coordinator Susantika
Tel: (02) 9562 6621.
advertising@mja.com.au, reprints@mja.com.au

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Tel: (02) 9562 6617. subscriptions@mja.com.au
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Highlights from our 1948 archives

Scarlet fever first took hold in Australia in 1875–1876, hard on the heels of an outbreak of measles. Scarlet fever killed 12 000 Australian children, the largest proportion in Victoria, in the 12 years to 1876. It led to developments in cleansing and fumigation of public places and houses, rubbish removal, effective drainage, unpolluted water and empowerment of boards of health. By 1948, when this advert appeared in the MJA, penicillin was the treatment of choice.



On pity

A short time ago a doctor in Sydney tilted at the daily Press because of publicity given to people with incurable illnesses or conditions for which expensive treatment of uncertain value had been recommended. It was contended that money donated as a result of these public appeals was often wasted and that the principle was not a good one.

We will not confuse the issue by discussing the suggestion sometimes made that “human interest” stories aim at deliberate exploitation of human misfortunes for their news value alone. The Press writer who is capable of such an attitude is not likely to be impressed by our protests and we shall not insult the decent writer by further reference to the matter.

It has been well said that a doctor must retain an attitude of detachment towards his patients if he is to retain his sanity. To serve their interests best he must be dispassionate and clear in his

judgement. He will do what he is able to do and cannot ask himself for more than that. He will handle a human personality with the same gentleness as surgical principles demand for delicate tissues. He will make cold appraisal of the facts, but will never shut up his bowels of compassion from the patient.

Dr John Brown gave us the best definition of pity nearly a century ago when he spoke of the eager young students dashing in to see the day's operations:

“Don't think them heartless; they are neither better nor worse than you or I; they get over their professional horrors and into their proper work; and in them pity — as an emotion, ending in itself or at best in tears and a long-drawn breath, lessens, while pity as a motive, is quickened, and gains power and purpose. It is well for poor human nature that it is so.”

Editorial, 20 March 1948

A remarkable case of scabies

In 1946, an Aboriginal boy, aged about 17 years, came under observation at Palm Island because of an extraordinary condition of the skin. Large, white, friable excrescences adorned his head, neck, trunk and all four limbs. They were itchy. He was always scratching and slept badly.

The condition had been present for about 6 years and had failed to respond to starch poultices, salicylic acid preparations, and the intravenous and intramuscular administration

of arsenicals, of which he had had about 100 injections. Material was scraped off the lesions and submitted for investigation.

Microscopic examination showed the skin scrapings to consist of greatly hypertrophied, but still nucleated stratum corneum. It was arranged in a loose network, and the intervening spaces were, to our astonishment, inhabited by numerous *Sarcoptes scabiei*.

15 May 1948

See pages 633, 644