

Medical experiments

1803 – 1970s

Details

Medical experiments on children in institutions happened in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Australia. The first documented experimentation on children in institutions in Australia was in 1803, where it was reported that John Savage, Assistant Surgeon of the New South Wales Colony, was “trying the effects” of the smallpox vaccine on “some of the Orphan Children, with the Governor and Committee’s Permission” (*The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 15 May 1803). At this time, supplies of the smallpox vaccine were maintained by injecting uninfected people with the virus, and women and girls at the Parramatta Female Factory were inoculated for this purpose (Weston, Gallagher and Branley, 2014).

During the twentieth century, babies and children in orphanages and Homes were used as subjects for medical experiments. The *Forgotten Australians* report detailed a number of studies carried out on children in orphanages and children’s Homes and also raised the issue of other experiments that may have occurred that were not officially reported (*Forgotten Australians* report, p.22). One reason given for the use of children in institutions in trials was that this group of children was particularly vulnerable to epidemics. Some experiments were formally documented, while others took the form of giving vaccines early to children in institutions, in part to model good vaccine practice and to encourage parents to vaccinate their children, but also to informally test the efficacy of these vaccines before they were distributed more broadly.

The *Forgotten Australians* report identified [St Vincent’s Orphanage, Nudgee](#), and the [Wilson Youth Hospital](#) as institutions in Queensland where children were administered experimental drugs or vaccines. Additionally *Forgotten Australians* contained details of trials carried out by the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute and the Commonwealth Serum Laboratory (CSL) on children in Victorian institutions between 1945 and 1970. Journalists at the *Age* newspaper investigated these experiments in 1997.

A report written by the Department of Human Services in November 1997 considered the issue of who had given consent for these children’s participation in the medical trials. The report found that “it is likely that the research institutes gained consent to conduct the research from staff responsible for the institutions and possibly in one case, from a Departmental employee” (*Protecting vulnerable children: A national challenge*, p. 12).

Trials of a herpes simplex vaccine were carried out on babies at the [St Joseph’s Foundling Hospital](#) in Broadmeadows in the 1940s and the results were published in the *Medical Journal of Australia* and the *Australian Journal of Experimental Biology and Medical Science*. The *Medical Journal of Australia* also reported on experiments with influenza vaccines conducted by the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute in the 1950s, on children under the age of 3 at Broadmeadows.

CSL tested quadruple antigen vaccines on babies and young children between 1959 and 1961 at five Victorian institutions: [St Joseph’s Foundling Hospital](#), Broadmeadows, [the Foundling Hospital and Infants’ Home](#) (Berry Street), East Melbourne, [Bethany Babies’ Home](#), Geelong, [Methodist Babies’ Home](#), South Yarra and [Turana](#) in Royal Park.

The media attention the publication of the *Age* investigation in 1997 led the Chairman of the National Health and Medical Research Council to comment that everyone involved in clinical research needed to “heed the lessons of

the past”.

In 2009, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne strongly supported the Federal Government's apology to child migrants and Forgotten Australians and in a statement, expressed

its deep regret for the part played by researchers linked to its community in vaccination research trials conducted after World War II using children in orphanages as 'subjects'.

In evidence given at the 2008 Inquiry into the Stolen Generation Compensation Bill, it was stated that Aboriginal children living at the [Kahlin Compound](#) were injected with serums to test the effectiveness or reactions to medicine, particularly for leprosy.

As well as formal trials to test vaccines or experimental drugs on children in institutions, some institutions were also established as experimental environments in which to raise children. In particular, [Hopewood](#), founded by Leslie Owen Bailey, was established to be an experiment in raising children in “a perfect environment”, using Bailey's philosophies of natural health and natural living. Children were required to conform to Bailey's exercise and diet programs, and were then measured and monitored by doctors, dentists and Bailey himself, and the results were published in medical journals and newspaper articles.

Some institutions administered drugs to children which had not yet been cleared for general use and therefore were regarded as experimental when they were administered. One example is the use of Depo Provera at Winlaton during the 1970s and 1980s, when Depo Provera was not approved for general use in Victoria until 1991. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, in its investigations into Winlaton, also noted that it was unclear if consent to use Depo Provera had been properly obtained (Royal Commission Case Study 30).

People who grew up in institutions have reported their experiences of potentially being in medical trials, including memories of being lined up and being injected by people in lab coats. Institutions mentioned include the [Victorian Children's Aid Society Home](#), [Allambie](#), [St John's Boys Home Canterbury](#) and [Neerkol](#) in Queensland.

More info

Related Entries

Related Organisations

- [The Foundling Hospital and Infants' Home \(1906 - 1964\)](#)
CSL conducted trials at the Foundling Hospital and Infants' Home
Date: 1959 - 1961
- [St Joseph's Foundling Hospital \(1901 - 1975\)](#)
Medical experiments were conducted on babies and children at St Joseph's from the mid 1940s to the early 1960s.
Date: 1945 - 1961
- [Methodist Babies' Home \(1929 - c. 1974\)](#)
CSL conducted trials at Methodist Babies' Home
Date: 1959 - 1961
- [St Gabriel's Babies' Home \(1935 - 1975\)](#)
The Age newspaper reported in 1997 on medical experiments conducted on babies at St Gabriel's in the 1950s.
- [Bethany Babies' Home \(1928 - 1977\)](#)
CSL conducted trials at Bethany Babies' Home
Date: 1959 - 1961

- [Turana \(1955 - 1993\)](#)
CSL conducted trials at Turana.
Date: 1959 - 1961
- [St Vincent's Home for Children \(1935 - 1971\)](#)
- [Hopewood \(1944 - 1970\)](#)
- [St Joseph's Home, Neerkol \(1885 - 1978\)](#)
- [Wilson Youth Hospital \(1961 - 1983\)](#)
- [Kahlin Compound \(1913 - 1939\)](#)
- [Allambie Reception Centre \(1961 - 1990\)](#)
- [St John's Homes for Boys and Girls - Canterbury \(1958 - c. 1997\)](#)
- [Winlaton \(1956 - c. 1991\)](#)
- [Mont Park \(1912 - c.1997\)](#)

Resources

- Hughes, Gary, [Polio vaccine tested at orphanages](#), The Age, 25 October 2004
- Milliken, Robert, [Vaccines tested on Australian orphans](#), The Independent, 11 June 1997
- Shortkids Downunder, [Submission no 121 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 2005
- Farrar, Lindsay, [Submission no 479 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 2005
- Slatterie, Patricia and Blick, Jeanette, [Suffer the little children](#), Inside: Life in Children's Homes and Institutions blog, 26 October 2010
- [University supports apology to Forgotten Australians](#), The Melbourne Newsroom, 17 November 2009
- Miller, Barbara, [University apologises for experiments on children](#), 18 November 2009

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