

Royal Women's Hospital

1856 –

Other Names:

- The Women's
- Melbourne Lying-In Hospital and Infirmary for Diseases of Women and Children

URL: <https://www.thewomens.org.au/>

Details

The Royal Women's Hospital was established in 1856. Its first location was a two-storey house in East Melbourne, then in 1858 it moved to a site in Madeline St (now Swanston St) in the inner-Melbourne suburb of Carlton. Originally called the Melbourne Lying-In Hospital and Infirmary for Diseases of Women and Children, its name was simplified in 1884 to the Women's Hospital (the 'Royal' title was conferred by Queen Elizabeth II on 6 September 1954).

The hospital provides specialist care for women and newborn babies. By the second half of the twentieth century, more women gave birth in the Women's maternity section than in any other hospital in the Commonwealth.

Like other public hospitals for women in other jurisdictions, the Royal Women's Hospital was involved in many Victorian adoptions, including during the era of forced adoptions. The Royal Women's Hospital submission to the Senate inquiry into the Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices states that "As the largest maternity hospital in Victoria, the Royal Women's Hospital (RWH) was responsible for the arrangement of over 5000 adoptions between 1940 and 1987, at which point its involvement in adoption ceased" (Submission 399). The Royal Women's Hospital was an approved adoption agency under the Victorian act (along with another 21 agencies in the state). Statistics show that in 1963 the hospital managed 10% of adoptions in Victoria (at this time around 50% of adoptions were managed by religious maternity homes). The Hospital's submission states that women from some of Victoria's religious or charitable maternity homes – [Berry Street](#), the [Girls' Memorial Home](#), [St Joseph's Foundling Hospital](#) and [St Joseph's Receiving Home](#) – attended the Women's for their antenatal checks. Other maternity homes kept the residents "closely guarded within the limits of the Home" (p.37).

During the post-war baby boom, the hospital expanded its maternity services by establishing the Henry Pride Wing for new mothers and babies. This wing was located at Villa Alba in the nearby suburb of Kew. One woman who made a submission to the Senate inquiry into forced adoption wrote that she was sent to Henry Pride Wing to recover from the birth, without her baby who was taken from her despite her expressed wishes to keep him. At this annex of the hospital she was distressed to be with other new mothers and their babies (submission 118).

By 1971, the Women's was responsible for 19% of adoptions in Victoria. In the same year, there was a peak number of 27% of hospital-arranged adoptions for single mothers. After 1971-72 there was a sharp decline in babies available for adoption from the Royal Women's, consistent with the national decline in adoptions, and increasing numbers of single mothers keeping their babies, from this period.

Annie Florence, a former nurse at the Women's, made a submission to the Senate inquiry, telling of her distress after seeing a program about forced adoptions on the ABC in 1998, which included historical film footage of a major public hospital:

I was absolutely stunned and appalled as I realised that I was one of those nurses (not in the actual film) but I had been a nurse working at the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne at exactly the time depicted in the program. I related and relived every incident that was depicted on the old film footage. Yes, we had taken babies from their mothers at birth, without them holding or even seeing their child. The mothers were then admitted into wards without their babies and ostracised in many different ways, finally being discharged about 1 week later, never having seen or held their baby or the "new" parents who had adopted their baby.

The babies stayed in the nurseries in the hospital waiting to be adopted, sometimes for months, their only contact being with the nurses such as myself who cared for them on a daily basis. Needless to say we became very fond of these babies, however it wasn't the same as being cared for by their mother (Submission 36).

The Senate report from its inquiry into the Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices presents several excerpts from submissions by women whose babies were adopted from the Royal Women's Hospital, with details of pressure and coercion, discrimination, harsh treatment and lifelong distress (pp.204-207). Here is a quote from June Smith whose son was adopted in 1961:

[M]y son, my beautiful son, was pulled from my arms because I did not want him adopted...I was condemned into silence for decades by the words and deeds of hospital staff at the Royal Women's Hospital Melbourne, I was told in no uncertain terms that I was worthless, that I had disgraced myself to society by being a single mother. I was told my baby would be better off without me. I was told that if I loved my son I would sign consent to adoption and not be selfish and want him to stay with me. I was given drugs. I was treated with contempt by nursing staff. I was never treated with the dignity that was my right as my son's mother (Submission 83, p.10).

The Senate report discussed some internal conflicts amongst staff at the Royal Women's Hospital about the treatment of single mothers. In her history of the hospital, Janet McCalman writes that internal divisions around the treatment of unmarried mothers in labour was "one of the most painful issues in the hospital's history. Those who defend the obstetricians and midwives argue that they were doing what they thought best; those who criticise see cruelty and wilful ignorance ...". The report provides a quote demonstrating the views of one obstetrician, Dr DF Lawson, from the Women's in 1959:

The prospect of the unmarried girl or of her family adequately caring for a child and giving it a normal environment and upbringing is so small that I believe for practical purposes it can be ignored. I believe that in all such cases the obstetrician should urge that the child be adopted... The last thing that the obstetrician might concern himself with is the law in regard to adoption.

The Senate pointed out that his comments imply that Lawson was aware that not everyone agreed with his hardline view. The report states "Dr Lawson was clearly conscious of these different views, some of them enshrined in law. His call to other professionals not only to disregard the natural mothers, but to disregard the law and pursue adoption for their babies, is an indictment of his professional conduct". McCalman includes a quote from a "progressive obstetrician" who observed that the Royal Women's Hospital did not take up modern obstetrics techniques when it came to single mothers: "... there was an attitude that you made her sweat it out a bit more if she was unmarried, and that she could not be respectable if she got married and had a caesarean scar" (Senate, 2012, pp.212-213).

The hospital made a submission to the Senate inquiry into forced adoption in 2011, which comprised a research report into its history and a statement by the Chief Executive Officer. The CEO's statement claimed that its

investigation “found no evidence of illegal practices at the RWH and no evidence of hospital-wide policies that discriminated specifically against single mothers” and insisted that practices “were in keeping with social attitudes, available financial support, and medical and social work knowledge and beliefs of the time”. The Senate committee’s report noted that the hospital’s apology “triggered angry correspondence” from mothers and that it directly contradicted evidence given to the committee. Because of this, the Senate said it “might be expected” that the Royal Women’s Hospital apology be “greeted with scepticism” and not be well received by people affected by forced adoptions (Senate, 2012, p.203).

In another [statement in 2023](#), the Women’s acknowledged its role in the forced separation of mothers and babies and their subsequent adoption. It stated:

For more than four decades, single pregnant women were treated poorly at our hospital and forcibly and permanently separated from their babies, who were then adopted. These were often very young women who deserved compassion and care, instead they were shamed and judged at their most vulnerable time.

The Women’s is committed to listening to and acknowledging the devastating experiences of these mothers and their now, adult children. We recognise the undeniable harm and long-term damage our actions have caused and we are committed to acknowledging their trauma and experiences.

The Women’s moved to a new site in Flemington Road, Parkville, in 2008.

Gallery



Aerial view of the Women's in Carlton, looking north circa 1970

Description: This is a copy of a photograph of the Royal Women's Hospital in Carlton, from around 1970. It is published on the [Finding Records website](#).

More info

Related Entries

Related Events

- [Inquiry into Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices, Commonwealth of Australia \(2011 - 2012\)](#)

The Royal Women's Hospital was mentioned in submissions 8, 18, 28, 36, 83, 86, 118, 399, 407, 412, & 414 to the Inquiry Committee as an institution that was involved in forced adoption.

Holds

- [Royal Women's Hospital records \(c.1856 - current\)](#)

Resources

- McCalman, Janet, *Sex and suffering: women's health and a women's hospital: The Royal Women's Hospital, Melbourne, 1856-1996*, 1998
- Kinghorn, Lyn, [Submission no 387 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), 2005
- Wilson, Rosalie, [Submission no 18 to the Senate Inquiry into Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices](#), 2011

- Name withheld, [*Submission No 28 to the Senate Inquiry into the Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices*](#), 2011
- Smith, Amelia, [*Submission No 130 \(and attachment\) to the Senate Inquiry into the Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices*](#), 2011
- Mailer, Gai, [*Submission no 407 to the Senate Inquiry into the Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices*](#), 2012
- McRae, Karin, [*Submission no 414 to the Senate Inquiry into the Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices*](#), 2012

Records

Records held by other organisations

- [Records of Victorian Adoptions \(c. 1908 - current\)](#)
Records of adoptions at the Royal Women's Hospital are in the custody of Adoption Information Services, Victoria.
 - [Correspondence files, single number series with 'B' \[Child Endowment\] prefix \(1904 - 1974\)](#)
Item B582 of the Child Endowment correspondence files relates to the Royal Women's Hospital
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