

# Across two continents and a century: the tale of two doctors

George R Santoro

*Two generations of Santoros have served the Italian community of Melbourne for over 70 years*

MY FATHER, SOCCORSO SANTORO, was born near Naples, Italy, in 1902. After graduation in medicine from the University of Genoa and internship at Alessandria, north of Genoa, he was called up for military service in the Battalion of Doctors and Pharmacists. On completing this service, he decided to travel around the world. As he spoke English well, and Italy was an ally of Britain in the 1914–1918 war, he took the sensible precaution of registering his Genoa medical degree in London, which allowed him to practise throughout the English-speaking world.

In June 1930, my father sailed to Australia on the Orient Line's "Orama". He arrived in Melbourne well equipped with the appropriate medical, surgical, obstetric and even dental instruments (his degree gave him the right to practise dentistry, although he never did). He started practice in the "Professional Chambers", 110 Collins Street, Melbourne, in August 1930.

In 1933, he married my mother, and in 1935 I was born. My father's gross income in the previous year was £761 (\$1522), and he stated in his 1935 tax return that as his ". . . practice consists of mainly Italians . . . scattered in all suburbs of Melbourne . . . , [his] average monthly mileage is 1200". He noted that petrol was 1 shilling and seven pence (15 cents) per gallon (3.5 cents per litre)!

My father's practice was not easy. Most of his patients were working-class Italians, who would occasionally sit on the floor in the corridor outside his rooms, to the surprise of the specialists in three-piece suits and watch chains also practising in the building. My father spent a great deal of

## Soccorso Santoro unveiling Dante, Melbourne, 1958



*Soccorso Santoro (standing) at the official unveiling of a bust of Dante Alighieri (a gift of the Dante Alighieri Society to the City of Melbourne) in the Treasury Gardens. When Soccorso resigned as President of the Society after nearly 20 years, he received a gold medal "Società Dante Alighieri" for his long service and for promoting the Italian language.*

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**Soccorso Santoro**

- 1902 Born Serino Italy
- 1926 Graduates in Medicine from the University of Genoa, Italy
- 1927–28 Internship at Alessandria, north of Genoa
- 1928–29 Military service
- 1930 Registers as medical practitioner, London, and sails from Naples to Australia
- 1931–61 General practice, Collins Street, Melbourne
- 1933 Marries Vida Clancy (a nurse who trained at St Vincent's Hospital), at St Ignatius Church, Richmond
- 1935 Attends British Medical Association 103rd Annual General Meeting and 1st Australian Congress (Melbourne); first Italian member of the BMA in Victoria (his copy of the *Book of Melbourne Australia 1935*, a review of contemporary medical practice written for this conference, is still in my possession)
- 1940 Interned as an enemy alien at Tatura, Victoria, for 6 weeks
- 1956 Official doctor for the Squadra Olimpica Italiana, in Melbourne for the 16th Olympic Games
- 1960 Cavaliere Ufficiale, Republic of Italy
- 1961 Dies Genoa, Italy, aged 59 years

time translating for patients and accompanying them to specialists.

This was an era of great respect for the family doctor, who was the confidant of many families. Migrants wanted someone who could understand them and their family ties. As their children mixed with local children, family strictness and unity broke down; many children refused to speak Italian and were desperate to be considered Australian. This rejection was upsetting to the older migrants, especially as they relied on the young to interpret.

My father took me on home calls to the Italian families around Carlton. They would be roasting coffee or making spaghetti, ravioli, salamis or prosciutto, but all work would cease as the whole family became involved in prolonged conversation with my father about some medical problem. It was unusual for him to complete a home call in under an hour.

My father was also involved in the Dante Alighieri Society, which promotes Italian culture and language, and was its president from 1931 to 1959. He was a delegate of the Italian Red Cross and responsible for financial donations, as well as the official doctor of the Italian Consul General in Melbourne and the Italian shipping lines.

When war was declared in 1939, my father was interned in a camp at Tatura in Victoria. Through the efforts of my mother, an Australian citizen, he was released after 6 weeks, while other Italians remained for the duration of the war. The conditions were that he report to Kew police station three times a week, not travel more than 40 kilometres from Kew and not go near the beach on Port Philip Bay, as he might signal enemy shipping! He was allowed to continue practice in Collins Street, but no more than two other Italians were to be in his surgery or waiting room at the same time — as a meeting of four was defined as a conspiracy. Any other Italian patients were asked to “go for a walk around the block”. For the same reason, tennis could not be played at our home with other Italians. The prohibition on speaking foreign languages on the telephone restricted history-taking before home visits. Our home was searched for subversive literature, but the complete library of the Dante Alighieri Society, hidden under the house, was not found. Nevertheless, our family was treated with great courtesy by the authorities, and, the few times I visited my father at Tatura camp, I remember Australian soldiers giving me oranges and playing with me.

In 1948, my father made his first trip back to Italy (a 96-hour plane flight) to see his family. Back in Australia, he continued to work tirelessly to promote the Italian community. For instance, he mobilised Italian clubs to donate to St Vincent's Hospital's building program in 1953 and presented 200 books by Italian authors to Melbourne Public Library in 1956. In 1960, the Italian language was accepted as a subject at the University of Melbourne, and an annual “Dr Santoro Prize” is given to the best student in first-year Italian. In 1960, my father received the honour of “Cavaliere Ufficiale” (Officer of the Order of Merit of the Republic) from the Italian government.

In 1961, on a trip to Genoa, he suffered a heart attack and was admitted to the same hospital in which he had studied medicine. In the preceding months, he had contacted many

**George Santoro**

- 1935 Born Melbourne
- 1962 Graduate in Medicine from the University of Melbourne
- 1965–2001 Solo general practice in Richmond, Victoria
- 1970–2001 Nominated Medical Officer for Italian government, assessing Italian pensions and past work-injury claims
- 1976–99 Treasurer and President of the Medical Benevolent Association of Victoria
- 1977 Cavaliere, Order of Solidarity of Republic of Italy
- 1983 President, Victorian branch of the Australian Medical Association
- 1983–present Director, Medical Defence Association of Victoria
- 1984 Cavaliere Ufficiale, Republic of Italy
- 1983–96 Inaugural President, Italian Medical Society
- 1986–94 Federal Council, Australian Medical Association
- 1988–89 Chairman, Lord Mayor's Fund for Metropolitan Hospitals and Charities
- 1989–97 Board Member and Chairman, St Carlo Complex for Italian Aged
- 1990 Member, Order of Australia
- 1994 Commendatore Order of Merit, Republic of Italy
- 1994–present Director and Treasurer, Melbourne Division of General Practice
- 1994–99 Board Member, Faculty of Medicine, University of Melbourne
- 1996 Current Member of Order of Australia Council (Governor General's committee for Australian honours)

of the 1926 graduates from the Genoa medical school to arrange a 35-year reunion. It was not to be. He died on 10 July 1961, aged 59, having practised in Collins Street for 31 years.

The year after my father died, I graduated in medicine from the University of Melbourne. Internship at Queen Victoria Hospital and locums in a few Italian and Australian practices led me to practise in the inner, (at that time) industrial, suburb of Richmond, where many Italians lived and worked. There was no alternative to solo practice, as few general practitioners spoke Italian, and a non-Italian-speaking partner could not have shared the workload equally. I was on call 24 hours a day to a large group of patients, as my father had been. In this situation, deputising services were a godsend, and, in 1970, I helped develop a service which still operates today.

In caring for the Italian community, not only is the capacity to communicate in Italian important, but so is the cultural understanding of illness. "Fire of St Anthony" explains the excruciating pruritis of shingles nicely, while an inability to weed or tend a vegetable garden suggests the shortness of breath of cardiac failure. I enjoyed my numerous home visits, which gave enormous insight into patient care. Taking a detailed medical history often revealed past medical misunderstandings, which had led to inappropriate medications and unhelpful stereotypes, such as "Mediterranean backache" and "Mediterranean gut ache". I found it

best to involve the patient and family and their opinions of the illness, its cause and treatment. Compliance with treatment is increased if combined with traditional management; dietary restriction is relished, as this supports the sick person being the centre of family attention.

In my career, I have also found time for community service as office bearer of the Victorian branch of the Australian Medical Association and the Medical Benevolent Association. I also formed the Italian, Greek and Chinese medical societies and was the inaugural president of the Italian Medical Society for 14 years. Many ethnic doctors feel isolated from their Australian peers because of the unusual demands of their ethnic patients. I have a particular interest, as chairman of the board of a home for Italian aged, in the special accommodation needs of ageing migrants.

I was very proud to be honoured by both the Italian and Australian governments for my contribution to the health and welfare of the Italian community. Recently, I have been involved with Dr Tony Mariani, current president of the Italian Medical Society, in producing a 300-page book on preventive medicine, in English and Italian, to assist migrants in lifestyle choices. With continuing migration to Australia, there is still much to be done toward compassionate primary medical care. My family's contribution gives me great pride.

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