

The Australian Medical Association at 50 years

In 1962, the Australian Medical Association (AMA) was formed out of the state branches of the British Medical Association in Australia. This year marks the AMA's 50th birthday. Since its creation, it has sought to represent the aspirations of the profession and actively participate in the political dimensions of health, as its predecessors did. It has become a major player in bringing social forces to bear on health policy and practice.

In considering the recollections of the many presidents of the AMA over recent years — published in *More than just a union: a history of the AMA*, marking the AMA's 50th birthday¹ — it becomes clear how closely the AMA's activities mirrored the politics of the day. This was not only in medico-political terms (particularly Australia's move towards universal health care in Medibank in the 1970s, and then

Medicare in the 1980s), but other social and political currents of the time that have shaped doctors' roles and positions in society.¹ The AMA really brought home the words of social medicine theorist and founder of modern pathology Rudolf Virchow: "Medicine is a social science, and politics is nothing more than medicine in larger scale."²

From Brendan Nelson's visits to Indigenous communities to the current focus on the effects of climate on health, the AMA has voiced doctors' concerns and championed public health issues to the public and the government. It has done so with impact — the Dirty Ashtray Award to discourage support for the tobacco industry, and, in the case of the New South Wales AMA, the long-running NSW doctors' strike in the 1980s to successfully

preserve professional independence, and the 5000-strong protest at Royal Randwick Racecourse in Sydney in 2003 to resolve the medical indemnity crisis.

As an example of sponsoring campaigns in my own specialty, the AMA, along with other health groups, highlighted for years the issue of mental health, long neglected and underfunded, resulting in parliamentarians acknowledging the importance of mental health to their constituents. Although there is some way to go, it would be fair to say that the government and community would have far less awareness of and access to mental health care today without this advocacy.

Alongside the more specialised doctors' organisations in Australia today, the AMA has aimed to be relevant to the whole profession and to be a forum for a variety of sectional interests — from senior consultants to students, and from general practitioners to specialists and hospital doctors. With such a diverse group of often opinionated individuals, it is a wonder that there is any consensus at all, and there have often been serious disagreements, such as when the vocational register for GPs commenced. But to those of us working in the organisation, what strikes us is the degree of agreement about the high ideals of doctors as a group, and the constant reference to patients as the ultimate goal

Opening address by Prime Minister Robert Menzies — MJA 1962; 9 June (edited extract)

"Mr. Menzies referred with displeasure to the fact that he stood 'naked, looking like a well-fed penguin' before the gathering, while most others were manifesting themselves in robes of glory. He considered that it was not right, because he was a Fellow of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians and also, to his astonishment, a Fellow of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists ... [he] stressed his firm conviction that nothing must ever destroy the personal relationship between doctor and patient. He said that it would be an unfortunate calamity if the human race became scientists and things experimented with. Above all, people must remain human beings."



Menzies addressing the inaugural meeting of the AMA, Bonython Hall, University of Adelaide, 19 May 1962. To the right of Menzies (speaking) in the front row are: Cecil Colville, first president of the AMA; Henry Newland, preceding president of the Federal Council of the British Medical Association (BMA) in Australia; and John Hunter, general secretary of the Federal Council of the BMA in Australia.



Cecil Colville, AMA president 1962–1964; first president of the AMA



Past presidents of the AMA at the AMA Gala Dinner, 25 May 2012, with current President, Steve Hambleton (far right). From left to right: Lindsay Thompson (1982–1985), Bryce Phillips (1988–1990), Keith Woollard (1996–1998), David Brand (1998–2000), Kerryn Phelps (2000–2003), William Glasson (2003–2005), Mukesh Haikerwal (2005–2007), Rosanna Capolingua (2007–2009), Andrew Pesce (2009–2011).

of all the AMA's efforts. There is a role for the AMA as a unifying force for all the sectional interests and concerns of different medical groups.

Of course, the criticism that the AMA plays to more profession-centric needs is also real. As well as trying to shape health care and health policy, the AMA seeks to represent the professional interests of doctors. Consequently, it also provides collegiate support, suggests doctors' fee schedules and defends the special role of the profession in the complex environment of the health sector.

In the next 50 years, the challenge for the AMA will be to prosecute its relevance and importance to present and future doctors. The AMA has a history of being an influential and articulate doctors' group. But to be truly effective as a forum for and voice of the profession, and to ensure it remains true to the aims of its founders, it will need to persist with its efforts to convince its harshest critics: the members of the profession.

Competing interests: I am a member of the board of the AMA.

Provenance: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

1. Nagle D. More than just a union: a history of the AMA. Sydney: Faircount Media Asia, 2012. <http://ama.com.au/a-history-of-the-ama> (accessed Jul 2012).
2. Waitzkin H. One and a half centuries of forgetting and rediscovering: Virchow's lasting contributions to social medicine. *Social Medicine* 2006; 1: 5-10.

Choong-Siew Yong*

MB BS, FRANZCP, CertChildAdolPsych,
Clinical Director
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, Hunter New England
Local Health District, Newcastle, NSW.

choong-siew.yong@hnehealth.nsw.gov.au
doi:10.5694/mja12.11108

* Choong-Siew Yong is a federal councillor of the AMA, and a councillor in the NSW AMA. He was federal vice-president of the AMA from 2005 to 2007, and was president of the NSW AMA from 2002 to 2004. □



Trevor Pickering, AMA president 1985–1988: oversaw the Cotton review and AMA reorganisation



Brendan Nelson, AMA president 1993–1995: advocated Indigenous health issues

