THE MEDICAL PROFESSION AND THE STATE
in
SOUTH AUSTRALIA
1836 — 1975

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is primarily a study of the reasons for the rise, after 1840, of the medical profession in South Australia, from a commonplace and diverse collection of unorganised individuals held in poor regard, to a powerful, well established and disciplined, science-orientated, exclusive profession which enjoyed high standing, eminence and income.

The principal argument is that the basic power and influence of the medical practitioner derived from Statute. In the first place legislation introduced state registration: this gave occupational closure and self-regulation – the cardinal footing of professional dominance. Thereafter a number of widely separated Acts each contributed to the enhancement of medical privilege, authority and the attainment of full professional status.

Of almost equal importance in the acquisition of power and status was the organised profession’s adoption of, and association with, science and technology. Eventually, all the adherents of any theory and practice of medicine, other than which the legally qualified determined to be orthodox, would be branded as ignorant and unreliable quacks.

A number of secondary sources have made an important contribution to the relentless acquisition of standing and authority by the medical profession. These include a continuous upward mobility through social class, achieved by marriage and income; the formation of influential, exclusive medical organisations, one illustration being the autocratic and paternalistic BMA, and another the elite Royal Colleges, first for the specialties, and later general practice: all quickly assumed a high standing. Doctors, particularly after the First World War, also began to enjoy close advisory and consulting relationships with governments, and they became prominent in many areas of their local and wider communities. Throughout, they were materially assisted in their achievement of high status,
important community standing and full professional status, by a sympathetic, fascinated and uncritical press.

The Page scheme in 1953 added a guaranteed high income. After the Second World War, technology intruded with increased rapidity and drama into medicine, and costs increased astronomically. By 1969 the federal government, alarmed at the abuses, enacted dramatic legislative changes. Thereafter the medical profession became divided and fragmented, and lost its ability to influence government at high policy levels.