

Hands Across the Water: Edna K. Huffman and the Development of the Medical Record Profession in Australia

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In 1948—before e-mail and Web conferencing—two countries separated by half a globe jumpstarted a national HIM profession by sharing expertise in person—in the person of Edna K. Huffman.

By 1948 the medical record profession in the US was thriving, and many countries were looking to the American Association of Medical Record Librarians for advice and assistance in improving their medical record services. Australia was one of these countries. American medical record professionals were seen as pioneers, and indeed leaders, in what was a relatively new profession within healthcare.

In Australia in 1948 there was growing concern about the standard of hospital medical records. Members of the Australian Hospital Association (AHA) acknowledged that to improve medical record keeping in Australia they should recruit a medical record expert from the US to advise on the implementation of efficient hospital medical record systems.

With help from Malcolm MacEachern, chairman of the Council of International Relations of the American Hospital Association, the AHA recruited Edna Huffman. Given her extensive experience as a medical record educator and practitioner, Huffman was seen as the ideal person for the job. She arrived in Australia in June 1949 and proceeded to have a major impact on the development of the Australian medical record profession and education of medical record personnel. During her six-month stay, her main task was to advise on the development of the medical record services at Royal Prince Alfred (RPA) Hospital in Sydney. In addition she visited other hospitals and conducted two short courses for medical record personnel, one in Sydney and one in Melbourne.

Huffman's visit was an outstanding success. With her advice and support, Australian medical record personnel proceeded to develop sound, uniform medical record systems in their hospitals. Also, with her encouragement they formed a professional organization with the establishment of two state associations in 1949. The formation of a national association followed in 1955.

The visit also highlighted the need for formal medical record librarian (MRL) courses. As an initial step, a six-week course was begun in Sydney in March 1951 at RPA Hospital. Sara McKinney, another American medical record pioneer who had been appointed MRL-in-charge at RPA Hospital in April 1950, was appointed director of studies.

McKinney conducted a short course in Melbourne and a longer, six-month course in Sydney in 1955, following which the New South Wales School for Medical Record Librarians was established in Sydney at the end of 1955 at RPA Hospital. In 1956 the first three-year, full-time certificate course based on courses offered in the United States commenced in Sydney. Constance Spurway, who followed McKinney as MRL-in-charge at RPA, was appointed director of training. Spurway, an arts graduate of the University of Western Australia, had a certificate in medical record librarianship from the Massachusetts General Hospital MRL school. From a simple beginning the school went from strength to strength. It is now part of the University of Sydney, offering both undergraduate and postgraduate HIM courses.

A second training school was established in Melbourne in 1961. With developments in HIM education in other states (Western Australia and Queensland), the profession has grown significantly. Australian HIM professionals are indebted to the early American and Australian pioneers who, over the years, guided and nurtured the fledgling profession into a strong and viable professional organization.

References

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