

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE25120187

Sparrow, Pat

(1922 - 2004)

Born	19220719, Sydney New South Wales Australia
Died	20041215, Sydney New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Midwife

Summary

Sister Pat Sparrow was a midwife at Crown Street Women's Hospital for over 30 years. She was Sister-in-Charge of the Labour Ward from 1968 until the Hospital closed in 1983. In a review of the official history of Crown Street Women's Hospital she is remembered as 'a quietly spoken, calm, experienced midwife who was always a strong advocate for women'.

Details

Sister Pat Sparrow completed her general training at St Luke's Hospital, Darlinghurst and then trained as a midwife at Crown Street Women's Hospital from 1946. Apart from leave to do the Tresillian early parenting support course and five years working in England and Denmark, she worked at Crown Street Women's Hospital until the hospital closed in 1983. She was the 'night supervisor' from 1960 and the Sister-in-Charge of the Labour Ward from 1968. She attended the International Council of Midwives meeting in Lausanne, Switzerland as one of two Australian official representatives in 1975.

Sister Sparrow alerted Dr William McBride to the correlation between babies born at the hospital with abnormalities and the fact that their mothers were private patients of Dr McBride who had prescribed thalidomide for their morning sickness. Dr McBride subsequently raised his concerns through a letter published in *The Lancet* in December 1961, which was one of the first published warnings about the drug. Sister Sparrow's role was only publicised much later, reported by former staff of the Crown Street Hospital, and she was reluctant to take any credit, telling *Sydney Morning Herald* journalists in 1988: 'I really do not want to come into this at all. I am really very sad about the whole thing'. She said to journalist Bill Nicol in 1989 that she hoped that Dr McBride would give nursing staff credit for their observations, but McBride's memoir mentions only her distress 'not only to be waiting for the possibility of deformed babies being born, but knowing the great disappointment of many babies being lost'. Journalist Dr Norman Swan writing after Dr McBride's death in 2018 also mentioned her role, noting that Sister Sparrow had identified that 'Dr McBride had started prescribing thalidomide as an anti-nausea drug when the other obstetricians hadn't'.

Pat Sparrow was a co-author of two books about midwifery in NSW and the Crown Street Women's Hospital; the second book includes her recollections of her training and her work in the labour ward, but there is no mention of thalidomide.

Published resources

Book

With Courage and Devotion: A history of midwifery in New South Wales, Alcock, W, Bayliss, U, Butler, M, Hayes, P, Woolston, H, and P Sparrow, 1984

The Women's Hospital (Crown Street) 1893-1983: A family remembers, Hayes, P, Sparrow, P, Thornton, A, Robinson, C, Doyle, L, and H Woolston, 1994

Crown Street Women's Hospital: A history 1893-1983, Godden, Judith, 2016

McBride: Behind the myth, Nicol, Bill, 1989

Killing the Messenger, McBride, William, 1994

News article

Dr William McBride: The flawed character credited with linking thalidomide to birth defects, Swan, Norman, 29 June 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/health/2018-06-29/thalidomide-william-mcbride-flawed-character-norman-swan/9920608>

The Foundation and the Fall, Hogarth, M, Lagan, B, and J O'Neill, 19 November 1988

Book review

Review of Crown Street Women's Hospital: A history 1893-1983 by Judith Godden, Cornwell, Chris, Autumn 2022, <https://australianmidwiferyhistory.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/CORNWELL-C-2022-Crown-St-book-review-AMN-Autumn>

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