



# 1930 – 1939

## SET BACKS AND RECOVERY

The Great Depression (1929-1933) forced the Commonwealth Department of Health to cut jobs and abandon functions. Activities to cease included public health, maternal and infant hygiene, tuberculosis and venereal disease control, and tropical hygiene. To help justify reduced spending, the Federal Government argued that its efforts over the past 11 years to encourage the States to do more for health had been successful.

The core function of the Department remained quarantine. As the Record of the Lyons Government put it in 1933: 'Without any cessation, the quarantine officials are constantly at work ... to protect this continent against some form of human or economic disaster.'

By 1936 when the strong-willed Billy Hughes became Minister for Health and Repatriation for a second time, the economy was recovering. Hughes was seriously concerned about the implications of the falling birth rate and high maternal mortality rate for the future of the nation. He believed Australia 'must populate or perish' and set up a fund to promote the welfare of mothers and infants.

To improve the country's research capacity, in 1937 the Federal Health Council was expanded to become the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC). The new body was made up of Federal and State representatives, but unlike its predecessor also included members of the medical profession. It became, and remains, the main funding body for health and medical research as well as the principal independent advisory body on matters of public health for the three tiers of government (local, State and Commonwealth), health professionals and the wider community.

In his speech to the first session of the NHMRC, Hughes warned of the poor state of the nation, reporting that 40 per cent of growing children suffered from malnutrition. By now heart disease and cancer were the greatest killers in Australia.

One of the NHMRC's first resolutions was to 'direct the attention of governments in Australia to serious neglect in adequate supervision of the bodily development of children before and during school age.' This coincided with a vigorous campaign to introduce milk into all schools.

In 1939 a demonstration child care centre was set up in each state capital to 'investigate and model programs for the mental, social and physical development of children'. These centres, named after Lady Gowrie, the wife of the then Governor General, continue to operate today.

Outbreaks of polio during the thirties caused much public concern and put pressure on authorities to respond to the epidemic. Although the Government did not adopt the unorthodox methods of muscle re-education developed by Sister Elizabeth Kenny, in 1937 the NHMRC did finance the future Nobel Prize winner, Macfarlane Burnet, to research the polio virus. Services for crippled children were also boosted by a gift of £50,000 from the British philanthropist, Lord Nuffield, in 1935...



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In 1939 the Department assumed responsibility for the Northern Territory's health services, although these were passed to the military upon the outbreak of war. It was not until the late forties that the Department became seriously involved with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples whose health was plagued by tuberculosis, yaws, syphilis, and blindness.

Two years earlier, the Department had begun making annual grants to the flying doctor service, set up by John Flynn in 1928, to promote medical help for the Europeans living in the outback.

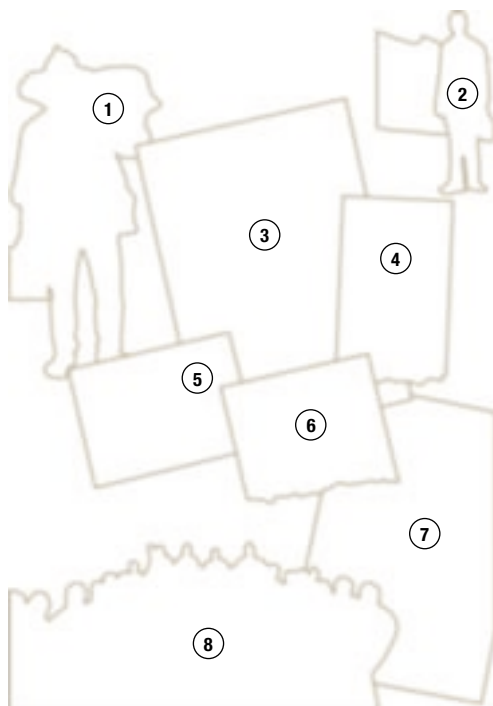
With the Government's finances improved, the late thirties saw the revival of the idea of a national insurance scheme which would provide sickness benefits, old age, widows' and orphans' pensions, and certain medical benefits. The National Health and Pensions Insurance Bill was introduced in 1938, with the Treasurer, R.G. Casey, arguing that a contribution of 2 per cent of wages was the only way the Commonwealth could afford to provide social services. Furthermore, it was argued, the contributory principle would preserve the dignity of the worker and encourage thrift in society.

This proposal again met with a hostile reception from workers, employers, and charities, as well as the medical profession. The Opposition Labor Party argued that national health services should be free. Although the bill was finally passed it was soon abandoned as the ominous situation in Europe forced a greater concentration on defence spending.

The increasingly belligerent state of the world stimulated attention to physical fitness and the launch in 1939 of a National Fitness Scheme. Australians were being called upon to ensure they were physically able to defend their country and their principles.

### History Montage Services

Poster 3: **1930 – 1939 : Set Backs and Recovery**



- 1 – Photograph – Swaggy during the Depression circa 1930s
- 2 – Photograph – Dr Clyde Fenton and plane (Royal Flying Doctors), circa 1930s
- 3 – Photograph – portrait of Lady Gowrie, circa 1930s
- 4 – Flyer – What is Health Week?
- 5 – Photograph – family portrait, Mr and Mrs Joseph Lyons and family outside Lodge, 1932
- 6 – Newspaper clipping – disturbance at Darwin, banners of the unemployed tent surrounded by anti-unemployment banners, 1930
- 7 – Departmental Letter with handwritten notes
- 8 – Photograph – group portrait, members at the first NHMRC meeting in Hobart, 1937

To view the series of montage posters representing the history of the Commonwealth Department of Health on the Internet, go to [www.health.gov.au/history.htm](http://www.health.gov.au/history.htm)