



1901 – 1919

A NEW ERA

Federation was a conservative movement. By 1901, the six British colonies on the island continent had decided to merge. The Constitution gave the new Federal Government responsibility for the defence of the nation, both against invasion from the populous nations of Asia and the entry of disease. While the States were keen to be protected from these threats, they also wanted to retain control of their internal affairs, including in matters of health.

While included in the Commonwealth's designated powers, it took until 1909 to establish a Federal Quarantine Service within the Department of Trade and Customs. Before that, however, together with the States, the Commonwealth had had to confront practical health matters. Infectious diseases such as small pox, cholera and yellow fever were debilitating the population. There were even outbreaks of bubonic plague.

The Commonwealth gradually became involved in the welfare of particular groups considered important in the development of a strong and healthy Australia — mothers and children, industrial workers and migrants. In 1908 it passed the Old Age and Invalid Pensions Act, followed in 1912 by a £5 'baby bonus' or maternity allowance. (£5 was equivalent to two weeks wages for an unskilled worker).

Such payments were not extended to Aboriginal, Asian and Pacific Islander mothers. Indigenous Australians were regarded as a dying race unable to cope with Western civilisation. The Commonwealth was explicitly denied the power to legislate on their behalf. Considered to be doomed to extinction the State authorities placed them on reserves where their health was neglected except when it was thought that the diseases affecting them, leprosy for example, were threats to the 'white' population.

In the course of their work, Commonwealth quarantine officers became part of an informal network of health officials and doctors operating at all levels around the country. These people, especially Dr J.H.L. Cumpston, Commonwealth Director of Quarantine from 1913, and Dr J.S.C. Elkington, Chief Quarantine Officer in Queensland, spearheaded the public health movement, which advocated that the States had a role in putting into practice the advances in knowledge about infectious diseases and preventative health. They wanted to do more.

The First World War heightened these concerns. The nation's health was measured by its ability to produce soldiers. The score card was not good: there were unnecessarily high infant and maternal mortality rates, the continued presence of preventable diseases, and a poor level of national fitness. On the battlefield, medical services became highly organised, a model which was to influence supporters of a more centralised health administration for Australia.

The war also prompted the establishment in 1916 of the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories to provide a source of anti-toxins and other biological agents, should overseas supplies become scarce...



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Another enduring defence issue was the need to strengthen the nation's frontiers by populating Australia's north. The problem, as many saw it, was that the 'white races' would not adapt to the tropical climate. Others, including Elkington, were sure that with an adequate investment in public health and research, the north would be suitable for 'a healthy white working race'.

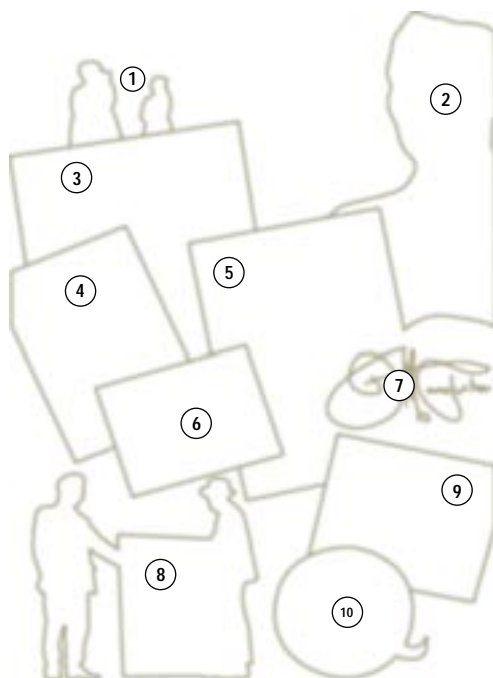
A further impetus for the Commonwealth's interest in tropical disease came when it took control of British New Guinea. In 1910 the Government established the Australian Institute of Tropical Medicine in Townsville. By 1916 Australia was in a position to work with the Rockefeller-funded International Health Board to extend its hookworm eradication campaign to Australia.

1919 saw a devastating epidemic of Spanish influenza brought to Australia by returning servicemen. The epidemic killed 12,000 Australians. It caused widespread panic. Troops were quarantined before being reunited with their families. Public meeting places such as hotels and theatres were closed, and masks had to be worn on the streets. The authorities' response to the crisis was chaotic, with police being stationed along State borders to try to prevent the disease from spreading.

Another development in 1919, the first international flight to Australia by Ross and Keith Smith, pointed to the need for improved quarantine and health services in hitherto undeveloped ports such as Darwin and Groote Eylandt. It was becoming clear that a stronger coordinating hand was required to protect the nation's health. And so the head of Quarantine, Dr Cumpston resumed his campaign for the establishment of a Federal Department of Health.

History Montage Services

Poster 1: **1901 – 1919 : A New Era**



- 1 – Photograph – TB sanatorium at Echuca, Victoria
- 2 – Photographic Portrait of Perrin Norris, First Federal Director of Quarantine
- 3 – Letterhead – Urgent Telegram
- 4 – Publication - Tropical Australia: is it suitable for a working white race?
- 5 – Photograph – Soldiers receiving vaccination for Typhoid, Egypt, WWI
- 6 – Photograph – Ross Smith's first flight to Australia (Darwin) 1919
- 7 – Filler – Dr Cumpston's signature - Director of Quarantine
- 8 – Photograph – Flu epidemic 1919, two men (one wearing a mask) with sandwich board declaring masks must be worn in church
- 9 – Photograph – Ships cat & rats, two sailors, one with trap and dead rats playing with cat
- 10 – Quarantine date stamp

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