A pioneer paediatrician in New Zealand
Geoffrey Bruton SWEET
(1.9.1870–17.5.1939) MB ChM (Sydney 1893)
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ABSTRACT
Paediatrics as a specialty was slow to emerge in New Zealand where Geoffrey Bruton Sweet was a pioneer full-time paediatrician from 1907 to 1939. Although there had been appointments as paediatric lecturers to the Otago Medical School, the early appointees were not restricted to paediatric practice. Dr Sweet, an Australian graduate, came to New Zealand and made a major contribution to the development of pathology services before embarking on a career devoted to paediatrics. He was a powerful advocate for children, well read and interested in clinical research, and realised the need to communicate with those directly involved in the care of children. For New Zealand, he was a man ahead of his time.

Figure 1: Napier Doctors 1894. In front Dr E Menzies. Back from left Drs TC Moore, FL deLisle, JA Jarvis, G Bruton Sweet, A Milne-Thomson.
Geoffrey Bruton Sweet is thought to be New Zealand’s first specialist paediatrician. He was born in Newton Abbot, Devonshire, England and went to Australia at the age of 12 years. He continued his education in Australia and took his medical degree at Sydney University. There he would have come under the influence of Professor Thomas Anderson Stuart (Dean) who demanded a high standard from his students. After graduation he took up a position as resident medical officer at Little Bay Hospital on North Head of Botany Bay, but within a year came to New Zealand to a full time hospital post in Napier, where he was registered on 24th May 1894. He was the resident medical officer (a post akin to medical superintendent) at Napier Hospital 1894–96.

His arrival there started a remarkable development in which Napier led the field for many years. At a local meeting of the British Medical Association (BMA), Dr Sweet moved that “a pathology sub-committee be formed to examine microscopically and bacteriologically if necessary, and report on morbid specimens forwarded to them by any member of this branch”, that “such a committee be composed of three local doctors and the mover” and further, that “the Pathology sub-committee meet at an early date to draw up a set of rules to be submitted to the next general meeting”. What was being set up was a district laboratory service.

He moved to practice in Whangarei where he was appointed public vaccinator in May 1897, port health officer in June 1901 and medical attendant at the new local hospital. In 1901 he married Kathleen Mary Louise Thompson, daughter of the local member of parliament. In 1906 he sold his practice in Whangarei and went to England, arriving in London in September. There he spent time as a clinical assistant at the Hospital for Sick Children in Great Ormond Street, and it was probably also during this time that he took advantage to learn from Professor Still who occupied the first chair of paediatrics in England at King’s College Hospital. By November 1907 he had returned to Auckland and set up in paediatric practice in the city. In 1908 he was appointed as physician to the Auckland Hospital and at the time was noted to be an authority on children’s diseases. He was honorary consulting and medical advisor at St Mary’s Home, Otahuhu until 1921 and also attended infants at the Door of Hope.

He volunteered to serve in WW1, was appointed Captain NZMC, November 1916 and soon left for England where he was based at Codford and later at Walton-on-Thames. On return to Auckland he resumed paediatric practice.

In 1923 he spent time in England in hospitals primarily noted for their work among children and attended the annual meeting of the BMA. He took time to visit a specialist hospital in Hampshire which dealt with conditions such as bone and joint tuberculosis and the post-acute effects of poliomyelitis that required long term hospitalisation. On returning to Auckland in 1924 he became senior physician at the Princess Mary Children’s Hospital, taking over from Dr WE Williams, a Remuera General Practitioner who was the first physician in charge of the children’s medical wards in the Princess Mary Hospital for Children. In 1927 he was granted three months leave of absence by the Auckland Hospital Board and travelled to the US by way of Sydney and Vancouver to attend a national conference in Kansas City.

Colleagues associated in the care of hospitalised children would have included Drs WE Williams who was an honorary physician up to the time of his death, SL Ludbrook who was appointed in 1926, EH Roche who held a temporary appointment 1932–35, and also E Hughes and E Sayers. In addition to his medical practice, Dr Sweet was involved throughout his career in a variety of activities aimed at improving the health of the wider community. Lifesaving instruction was undertaken at the local swimming club. He was a strong advocate for pasteurised milk and ran advertisements in the local newspaper exhorting its adoption. Injury prompted a “good Samaritan” response. He also showed—at significant risk to himself—no hesitation in going to the aid of a young man being attacked by a shark. He spoke out for better treatment for returned servicemen suffering from tuberculosis. There was involvement in the organisation and care of...
children made ill, uncared for or orphaned by the influenza epidemic. He spoke out against overcrowding in schools, was concerned about the dietary habits of school children and became an advocate for free milk in schools.

He was aware of the deficiencies in the training of those to whom infant care was entrusted. In 1920 he published a book entitled “Lectures on the Management of Infants in Health and Sickness” which was based on a short series of lectures delivered to the nurses at St Mary’s Home for infants. In it he acknowledged the work of the Plunket Society in improving the health of infants, but felt it his bounden duty to criticise the teaching of Dr Truby King on infant feeding. Although the book received a favourable review in the Nursing Journal, it generated an unwarranted, irascible response from Dr Truby King. A telegram was sent to the New Zealand branch of the BMA protesting against the attitude taken up by Dr Sweet in the book and asking its council to take action in the matter. There followed an article to the local medical journal denigrating Sweet’s approach and advice regarding the feeding of infants which was at variance (rightly) with his own, which was promulgated by the Plunket Society. There was a measured reasoned response from Dr Sweet in a paper he read before the Auckland Division of the New Zealand BMA, which was subsequently published.

As a practising physician, he was actively involved in the local branch of the BMA, attending meetings, annual national congresses and served as president of the Auckland branch. In addition to presenting papers at annual BMA congresses, there were also presentations at conferences of Child Welfare and the National Council of Women. He was an early member of the Auckland Clinical Society and contributed to its meetings.

He published articles in scientific medical journals and was on the advisory board of the Archives of Disease in Childhood (c1931–1939). In addition to the book, which was published in 1921 and dedicated to Dr GF Still “...as a slight recognition of the benefits derived from his personal teaching”, he left an unpublished manuscript, which reflected his long-standing interest in infant welfare. This would have been the basis for a book about some of the health problems of infancy directed towards senior medical students and general practitioners. In it he clearly outlines the features and management of problems commonly encountered in the first year of life. The text reflects the best practice of the time presented in an uncomplicated manner.
In Dunedin, Dr Isiah De Zouche had been registered in 1877. There was a hospital appointment as a physician and an account of the times notes there were no specialists. He had an appointment as lecturer in Diseases of Children at the Otago Medical School 1886–1893. Dr Ernest Harry Williams MB ChB New Zealand graduated in 1899 and then spent several years in Britain including time at Great Ormond Street. He returned to Dunedin where he was registered in 1908 and practised as a general physician with clinical responsibility for the children’s ward in Dunedin Hospital. In 1914 there was a medical school appointment as lecturer in Diseases of Children—a position he held for several decades.

Dr Sweet limited his private and hospital practice to paediatrics from the time he returned to New Zealand in 1907. His successor, Dr Ludbrook, although having had several years of experience in paediatrics in England and being appointed to a paediatric position at Auckland Hospital in 1926, did not limit his practice to paediatrics until 1940.

In 1937 Dr Sweet came into conflict with the Auckland Hospital Board because of the replacement of honorary surgeons by others whom he considered less well qualified. His appointment was discontinued as he preferred to remain free to criticise the Hospital Board and its officers when warranted. He died suddenly on 17th May 1939.

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Nil.

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