Response to letters by Paul and Bunkle

The 27 August 2010 issue of the NZMJ contained further examples of the orchestrated campaign which has sought to undermine Professor Linda Bryder’s book, The History of the 'Unfortunate Experiment' at National Women’s Hospital, since its publication in August 2009. One of the repeated refrains has been that Bryder—‘without any legal or medical qualifications’—fails to understand the medical science at the heart of the story.1 This angle was taken up by Associate Professor Jo Manning in the introduction to The Cartwright Papers, where she wrote ‘Given that Bryder is a social historian and not a medical scientist, a striking aspect of this book is her lack of deference to the expertise of other specialists in their field.’2

It is surprising therefore that Ms Phillida Bunkle, who is not medically or legally qualified, undertook the task of responding to Sir Iain Chalmers’ critique of Professor Charlotte Paul, with an interpretation of case notes and a commentary on the legal system, under the heading ‘Reassessing Cartwright—the factual record’ on 27 August.

While Bunkle defended Paul, Paul’s contribution to the 27 August issue of the NZMJ took the form of a response to Dr Paul Patten’s letter of 30 July, which challenged her claim that Professor Bryder had a ‘particular relationship … with gynaecologists whose work she was researching’.

Paul denied categorically that she was referring to Professor Colin Mantell and Dr Tony Baird, stating that a close reading would show otherwise. Careful scrutiny of her comments in The Cartwright Papers, however, suggests otherwise.

Paul’s allegation was highlighted in Manning’s introduction to The Cartwright Papers, where she stated that ‘Paul’s reading of Bryder’s History corroborates her earlier surmise (Chapter 4) that the author’s work is influenced by a particular relationship she formed with some doctors at National Women’s while conducting the research.’3

Paul herself first referred to this on p.97 of The Cartwright Papers, where she alleged that ‘a group of gynaecologists appears to have guided her [Bryder] in determining whom she should take seriously and whom she should not’. She returned to this theme on p.118, where she noted that Bryder’s book had been ‘effusively welcomed by two other senior gynaecologists’, and that ‘All this adds weight to my earlier surmise (see chapter 4) that Bryder’s work was influenced by the particular relationship she formed with gynaecologists whose story she was researching.’ The footnotes for this section refer to Mantell and Baird; they make no mention of any other gynaecologist.

This view was also promoted by Paul’s colleague, Professor Sir David Skegg, in the New Zealand Herald of 19 September 2009, where he was quoted as saying: “This leaves her open to the accusation that she may have been ‘captured’ by some of the people who were unhappy with Judge Cartwright’s findings”, says Skegg. “One of the doctors interviewed and quoted [by Bryder] was found by the judge to have misled...
the public during the inquiry.’ The two doctors named by Judge Cartwright on p.172 of her report were Mantell and Baird.

Closer examination of Bryder’s book demonstrates the absurdity and mischief in the claims of a particular relationship. Mantell was interviewed by Bryder’s research assistant in relation to the history of National Women’s Hospital but this was not used in *The Unfortunate Experiment*, and the only reference to the interview with Baird was his comment about Green’s views on Caesarean birth (p.85).

The other references to Baird in the book are to a statement he made at the 1988 Inquiry (p.85); a comment made by Coney about Baird in 1988 (p.106); Coney’s debate with Baird and Bruce Faris in 1990 (p.156); a reference to a letter by Baird in the *NZMJ* in 2004 (p.157); a 1988 letter written by Baird, held in the Joan Donley archives (p.162); his appearance as one of six individuals who questioned Coney’s interpretation of events in 1988 (p.173); his 1990 letter to the *New Zealand Herald* (p.178) and a 1993 quote about Baird by patients’ advocate Lynda Williams (p.179).

It is hard to see how a discerning reader could interpret any of this as evidence of Bryder being ‘captured’. When Baird sought redress from the publishers of *The Cartwright Papers* for these allegations the response he received was that the particular relationship derived from the fact he had been interviewed by Bryder’s research assistant. If such were the case, then no historian would be free from similar accusations of bias!

In her letter, Bunkle made many other comments which merit a response, but I will draw attention to just one—her statement that ‘It also follows from the judicial status of the Inquiry that when its findings are contested in the media the judge cannot defend herself.’ She might have added that judges are expected to be impartial. This did not inhibit Dame Silvia from addressing the 2008 ‘Twenty Years After’ conference in Auckland, which celebrated the anniversary of the publication of the Cartwright Report and was the basis of *The Cartwright Papers*.

Interestingly, the Bridget Williams Books online advertising of *The Cartwright Papers* still names Dame Silvia as one of the contributors, though her paper did not appear in the published volume. Many would view the continued inclusion of her name on the website (more than 8 months after publication of *The Cartwright Papers*) as an endorsement of its contents and conclusions.

In this context consideration might be given to one of Dame Silvia’s comments at the anniversary celebrations: ‘But I realise now that this was a drama unfolding in the nation’s living rooms, a drama in which there were goodies and baddies, and for all time, I was placed with the goodies, if not by the medical profession.’

Fortunately, most historians, including Bryder, do not take such a simplistic approach to their subject.

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References:

1. Letter to the editor from Professor Linda Holloway and Professor Charlotte Paul, Listener, 22 August 2009, p.7; Professor Sir David Skegg, New Zealand Herald, 19 September 2009.


3. ibid, p.1.

4. Personal communication from Dr Baird, September 2010.