



The long locum: health propaganda in New Zealand

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Abstract

Health Department folklore since the 1950s has attributed the rise of health education in New Zealand almost entirely to the efforts of one man, 'Radio Doctor' Harold Turbott. The historical evidence reveals, however, a more extensive commitment by the Health Department, dating back to its foundation in 1900. This paper examines the evolution of health education in New Zealand and concludes that Turbott's role in its development has been overstated, largely at his own instigation.

In the last months of the nineteenth century, the wife of an Auckland painter and carpenter gave birth to a son who would become one of the best-known voices in New Zealand. Dr Harold Bertram Turbott's broadcasts as the 'Radio Doctor' spanned more than four decades. Several generations have abiding memories of growing up with the doctor's avuncular tones from his weekly Saturday morning broadcasts. Indeed, one Auckland GP resisted a colleague's entreaties to attend continuing medical education courses by boasting that he kept himself up to date by listening to the Radio Doctor! (Personal communication, Dr JR Richards, who was not the GP in question!) These talks covered public health and medical topics but not surgical. Copies were sent to every public health nurse as background for their own talks to local audiences and many also appeared in the departmental magazine *Health*, which began publication in 1948.

Outliving one's contemporaries is one of the most effective ways of fostering a particular version of events. In Turbott's case this reached its apogee in April 1984, when he was interviewed for a *Spectrum* documentary entitled 'The long locum' – a reference to a broadcasting career that began as a temporary measure during World War 2.

The introduction to the *Spectrum* interview stated that Turbott broadcast his first health talk in 1943, after Prime Minister Peter Fraser sacked the Controller of the New Zealand Commercial Broadcasting Service, the controversial Colin Scrimgeour. Fraser phoned Turbott to ask him to take over 'Uncle Scrim's' daily three-minute talks on health. Turbott confirmed this during the *Spectrum* interview, and repeated the claim in his unpublished autobiography, which noted that the format of his talks changed to a weekly seven-minute broadcast in 1946 and that he maintained this pattern with only one six-month interruption until 1984.¹

Turbott's involvement in health education, of which his radio work was the most visible outcome, has given rise to one of the most pervasive mythologies in the history of the Department of Health, as it was known until 1993. The seeds of the myth were sown more than thirty years before the *Spectrum* programme, and were strongly rooted.

Addressing a conference of medical officers of health in 1953, Turbott described how he persuaded Health Minister Arnold Nordmeyer in 1943 to fund health education, in

the face of opposition from Director-General of Health Dr Michael Watt.² Turbott's summary dismissal of Watt stemmed in part from resentment at his failure to succeed him. Watt had retired in 1947, and Turbott confidently expected to take over in 1950 when Watt's stop-gap successor, Dr Thomas Ritchie, also retired. Instead, the position went to Dr John Cairney, a hospital medical superintendent who had never previously worked in the Department. Many other senior officers retired in the early 1950s, leaving few in a position by 1953 to challenge Turbott's interpretation of events.

Turbott's account of the origins of health education was endorsed in 1960, the year after he finally became Director-General. Writing in the *International Journal of Health Education*, Dr Derek Taylor claimed that 'The story of health education in New Zealand goes back to 1927 when a young medical officer of health began an active health education programme in his district', before concluding that 'We have made steady progress since the early struggles of that young medical officer of health over 30 years ago.'³ Taylor was hardly an impartial observer. He had followed in Turbott's footsteps as Medical Officer of Health for Gisborne and was installed by him as the first Director of Health Education in 1957. In his unpublished autobiography, Turbott wrote that Taylor's appointment signified that 'my long struggle had achieved its end'.

The myth that health education had been added to the public health agenda as the result of a personal crusade by Turbott was now firmly established, but departmental and other records reveal a very different story. Educating the public through the print media had been part of the Department's agenda from its foundation in 1900. The prime mover behind its early media campaigns was the country's first Chief Health Officer, Dr James Mason, who was no stranger to writing for a general audience. On 30 June 1888, shortly after qualifying in Medicine, he contributed an article entitled 'My First Operation' to his Scottish hometown paper, the *Arbroath Guide*.

Mason was a gifted communicator, even within the potentially dull pages of his annual reports. The first of these was described in 1901 by one of his old Glasgow medical teachers as being reminiscent of the work of Joseph Addison or Charles Lamb, two of the greatest essayists in the English language.⁴ New Zealand commentators echoed this sentiment. An *Evening Post* editorial of 29 September 1904 on his fourth report commented favourably on Mason's technical knowledge, enthusiasm and bright literary style.

Mason was keen from the outset to convey the public health message as widely as possible. From 1900 until 1905 he acted as editor of the *New Zealand Medical Journal*, a role that provided him with a further outlet for health propaganda. In April 1904, he included several graphic photographs of smallpox victims with his account of a recent outbreak. There was no adverse response to these shock tactics. Five months later, Mason incorporated some of the same illustrations into his annual report, prompting sharp criticism in parliament.⁵ What was acceptable in a medical journal, it seemed, was not regarded as suitable for a predominantly lay readership.

From the time of his arrival in the colony, Mason had been eager to include Maori in the health education programme. In August 1895, he wrote to the Premier, Richard Seddon, offering to devise simple guidelines for sanitation in Maori kainga, presumably unaware of the earlier publication of James Pope's *Health for the Maori*, one of the colony's first public health pamphlets.⁶ As Chief Health Officer, Mason

encouraged Maori Health Officer Dr Maui Pomare to publish pamphlets in Maori on smallpox (1902) and infant welfare (1909). The latter paralleled the efforts of Plunket Society founder Dr Truby King, whose writings on the subject were also sponsored by the Department.

The Department's commitment to health education survived Mason's dismissal in 1909. Dr Doris Gordon, later to become a fearless advocate for improved maternal and infant health, recalled in her autobiography how one of the major concerns of senior departmental officials in 1917 was to evaluate what had been written for the press, in order to allay public anxiety about health issues.⁷ The following year's great influenza epidemic gave ample opportunity to test the effectiveness or otherwise of these endeavours.

Initially, such efforts were restricted to print media. In 1925, the Department published *New Zealand: A Healthy Country: Striking Facts and Records*. This 48-page booklet comprised reprints of ten articles from the *Evening Post*. They dealt with core public health and preventive medicine topics, such as maternal welfare, school children, pure food, the dental health of children, and Maori health. The opening sentence noted it was 'important in the public interest periodically to review the activities of a Department like the Health Department in an effort to determine if its progress has been satisfactory and if that progress is still tending in the right direction'.

The institution in 1925 of the country's first national radio broadcasting system allowed for an extension of health propaganda. The Division of Dental Hygiene was the first of the Department's branches to grasp the new medium, with a series of broadcasts in 1926, the year before Harold Turbott's recruitment as a district health officer. Yet the Department was slow to make full use of the opportunities afforded by radio. In the late 1920s, the emphasis remained on spreading the health gospel by means of the written word. This involved the widespread distribution of posters to heavily used venues such as railways stations, and exhibitions at locations such as Agricultural and Pastoral shows and annual health weeks. Staff lectured to a variety of unspecified audiences but the annual reports contain no mention of broadcasts at this time.

A new era in health education began with the retirement in 1930 of Dr Thomas Valentine, who had headed the Department for the previous 21 years. Dr Michael Watt, about whom Turbott was later so dismissive, took over as Director-General of Health. From the early 1930s, Watt's annual reports contain acknowledgements to the Radio Broadcasting Board for its courtesy in transmitting talks on health education. By the middle of the decade, departmental representatives were delivering weekly health discourses, supplemented by a separate series of radio addresses by school medical officers. Officials also undertook one-off assignments, such as a 1932 broadcast by Miss Janet Moore of the Department's recently established Postgraduate School for Nurses on nursing as a career for young girls.

Watt regarded these broadcasts as an important part of the health agenda. When the executive council of the New Zealand Obstetrical Society discussed the 'Suggested Education of Public by Suitable Broadcasting Addresses' in 1935, they were heartened by a letter from Watt stating he was in thorough agreement with the proposal.⁸

Even before this date, health authorities had been willing to endorse appropriate messages. In February 1931, for example, the *NZMJ* published the text of a 1YA broadcast by Dr James Hardie Neil, a well-known Auckland doctor, on behalf of the Auckland Cancer Committee. Soon afterwards, the Department's annual report noted that cancer publicity was continuing and stressed the importance and effectiveness of health education in preventing illness.

By 1932, concerns were being expressed about the potential misuse of the airwaves. In June, the council of the New Zealand Branch of the British Medical Association resolved that any radio broadcast of a medical nature should be submitted to the Health Department by the Broadcasting Board before transmission. Council minutes contain several references to this issue over the next year or so, but it was not until 1936 that the root cause of this concern became clear.^{9,10}

In September 1936, the BMA council expelled Dr Ulric Williams for gross breaches of its ethical rules. His transgressions included contradicting scientific orthodoxy and he was also accused of advertising, by permitting his photograph to appear alongside one of his articles in the *Radio Record*. Williams also broadcast regularly on health topics. In March 1938, the BMA wrote to Health Minister Peter Fraser about Williams' misleading observations regarding the supposed causes of poliomyelitis, asking Fraser to ensure that public statements, especially on infectious diseases, should conform with official statements made by departmental officials.^{11,12}

The Department's response was heavily influenced by Dr Watt's research trip to America and Europe later that year. In a report dated June 1939, he concluded that health education in New Zealand did not receive the attention it merited, and proposed the appointment of someone with journalistic training to supply copy for press and radio, prepare exhibits, and revise the Department's growing collection of educational pamphlets.

During his visit to London, Watt had attended a national conference on nutrition in April 1939. His report made no mention of this but it did note that many health departments in the USA employed special officers trained in dietetics, who disseminated information through lectures, radio talks, and pamphlets.¹³ Watt, for whatever reason, failed to press home the point by referring to events closer to home; on 22 April 1939 the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that the Queensland health authorities had sponsored a series of dramatised broadcasts on nutrition.

New Zealand's response to this trend kicked off in September 1939, with the first of eight radio talks on nutrition by Dr Elizabeth Bryson. Although no longer connected with the Health Department, Bryson had been a school medical officer from 1915 until 1918. She was also prominent in the League of Mothers, founded in 1926 by Lady Alice Fergusson (wife of the Governor-General) to promote the Christian upbringing of children.¹⁴

In 1939, the Health Department broke new ground with the appointment of Dr Muriel Bell, one of the country's few recognised medical scientists, as its Nutrition Officer. One of her first tasks was to edit *Good Nutrition: Principles and Menus*. Based on a League of Nations initiative, this was intended to 'check false dietary habits, oust faddism and give food its normal significance'. The publication was a joint endeavour

by the Otago Medical School, the Health Department, and the recently formed Medical Research Council chaired by Director-General Watt.

Bell quickly became a household name thanks to her contributions to *The Listener*, another government venture launched in 1939. The magazine's 'Advice on Health' column was published alternately under the names of Muriel Bell and of Harold Turbott, who was promoted to the position of Director of School Hygiene in 1940. For a country caught up in the rigours of war, Bell's nutritional counsel was an important part of the overall propaganda effort. In pursuit of this end she worked closely with the redoubtable Maude Basham, whose first morning programme for the New Zealand Broadcasting Service had gone to air on 30 October 1936. Bell provided the expert explanation for using certain foodstuffs while 'Aunt Daisy', as she was better known, followed up both on air and in *The Listener* with recipes to make Bell's recommendations more palatable.¹⁵

Turbott's *Listener* columns, in contrast, were more wide-ranging. Many depended on advice tendered by other departmental specialists and reworked by Eric Marris, the journalist recruited as a result of Watt's 1939 report. In 1941, the Department was given the opportunity to extend its efforts to the spoken medium. The chance was too good to pass up. By this time, 86% of all households possessed radio licences, almost a six-fold increase from the 60 000 or so recorded listeners a decade earlier.

The initial series of Health Department broadcasts in the second half of 1941 were labelled 'Health in the Home'. Nurses were urged to tune in, and were asked to encourage lay people to do likewise. With Aunt Daisy already in situ and covering similar territory, Muriel Bell was probably never a contender for the role of presenter. Harold Turbott, with his wider remit, was the logical choice.

I have not trawled through *The Listener*'s back files in detail, but a perusal of Health Department records reveals that these broadcasts continued in some form or another during 1942. Cabinet subsequently approved a national health education plan on 7 May 1943, following discussions with Dr Watt. The programme included increased use of radio and presumably confirmed Turbott's role as the voice of the Department.

Turbott made the most of his opportunities. He enjoyed even greater longevity as a broadcaster than Aunt Daisy, partly because he started earlier in life. She enlightened the nation for more than a quarter of a century until shortly before her death in July 1963, aged 84. He remained on air until 1984, by which time he too was in his 85th year.

Turbott unquestionably made a major contribution to broadcasting, for which he received the Mobil radio award in 1987. However, claims that he had to mount a personal crusade to overcome opposition from within his own Department bear the hallmark of an unrepentant self-publicist. The seeds of the Health Department's health education policy were sown much earlier and nourished by senior staff such as Dr Watt, whose contribution Turbott repeatedly failed to acknowledge.

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