



Ballarat
District Nursing
& Healthcare

2011 | Our
Centenary Year

Our Nurses Learn to Drive

The Story of Elsie Isobel Walsh



ELSIE ISOBEL WALSH



Elsie with the Society's car, a 1923 T Model Ford

Elsie Isobel Walsh was born in Barkstead on 13 June 1901 and her family lived there until 1942 when her mother died and the family moved into Ballarat. She attended Macarthur Street Post Primary School and completed her nursing training at the Ballarat Base Hospital from 3 April 1922 until 3 April 1925.

After her time at the Base Hospital, Elsie joined Ballarat District Nursing Society (BDNS) and became one of the very first nurses to drive a motor vehicle, as part of her job of visiting sick and elderly people in their own homes. Motor vehicles were not very common at the time, and the progression from bicycle to motor vehicle was a big step for the Society. Female drivers with motor licences were impossible to recruit, and any new district nurses had to be given driving lessons before proceeding.

Mechanical knowledge such as changing a tyre would have been nonexistent; however Elsie accepted the challenge and got on with the job. She would have driven all over Ballarat to attend to patients, provide other comforts, ensure that diabetics received their injections and that wounds were attended to and dressed.

When first driving her BDNS motor vehicle, Elsie was backing up the street to park and found herself and the car between the front and back legs of a large horse pulling the baker's cart. The local constable attended and advised her father that he would have taken away her licence except for the fact that "she was a really good nurse".

Elsie moved on to train at the Royal Women's Hospital where she completed her midwifery training before returning to Ballarat. When she became engaged to George Ross, a mining engineer, she was requested to move out of the Ballarat Base Hospital nurses' home. Elsie subsequently relocated Gregory Street to live with George's parents until she married in 1934, at age 33.

Elsie's district nursing experience stood her in good stead to provide private nursing services to people in their own home, as recommended by medical practitioners. Part of this was to assist at St. Patrick's College and Ballarat Grammar School when a severe epidemic of measles broke out in Ballarat and hospitals were filled to capacity.

After her marriage, Elsie continued to provide voluntary nursing to many people in Ballarat, particularly neighbours who suffered from diabetes and required regular insulin injections. She became well known as a person who would assist should there be any medical problems requiring minor attention.

Elsie's neighbour contacted her one day to request her nursing expertise for her very ill husband. Elsie found that he had tetanus and told his wife to get him to the hospital as quickly as possible, as he was suffering from lockjaw. He was taken to the hospital and they told him to put his false teeth in place to assist with the lockjaw problem. He subsequently died through the night.

Elsie was a long term volunteer at the Red Cross Blood Bank in Ballarat and served on a very regular basis.

Elsie's qualities were that of a quiet achiever, someone who was prepared to "have a go", and was very community minded. She passed away on 23 October 1966.

This document has been prepared for submission to Women's Health Grampians for consideration of Elsie Walsh as one of "Ballarat's Greatest Women" on behalf of Ballarat District Nursing & Healthcare.

Researched and written by Barbara Hughes, former Chairperson – Committee of Management.