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McWhirter, R (2008). Lymph or Liberty': Responses to Smallpox Vaccination in the Eastern Australian Colonies. University Of Tasmania. Thesis. <https://doi.org/10.25959/23210159.v1>

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‘Lymph or Liberty’: Responses to Smallpox Vaccination in the Eastern Australian Colonies

Rebekah McWhirter, B.A. (Hons.)

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy



University of Tasmania

July 2008

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Rebekah McWhirter

22 July 2008

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Rebekah McWhirter

22 July 2008

ABSTRACT

The popularisation of smallpox vaccination from 1798 appeared to offer the opportunity to check the spread of one of the world's most feared infectious diseases, and the global dissemination of this new technology was rapid. Despite its popularity, vaccination also stimulated significant resistance, for a wide variety of reasons. This thesis is both a social and political history of the responses to vaccination in the eastern Australian colonies of New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania, from the first Compulsory Vaccination Act in 1853 to Federation in 1901. Despite many cultural, geographical and ideological similarities, each colony followed a different course: Victoria both enacted and enforced compulsory vaccination; Tasmania passed, but failed to consistently enforce, similar legislation; and New South Wales never imposed compulsory vaccination.

This work situates responses to vaccination and its compulsion within a broader framework of colonial perceptions of and experiences with smallpox, vaccine technology, and developments within the state, medicine and society. The colonies derived a great deal of natural protection from their geographical situation, and smallpox was never endemic to Australia, yet it was nevertheless considered a serious and preventable threat. No single factor can explain the different prophylactic strategies pursued by the colonies, and instead a wide range of influences must be assessed in their specific historical context to render these differences explicable. This highlights the significance of smallpox and vaccination in contributing to the development of national identity and the growth of expert bureaucratic structures.

As the first state-sanctioned and subsidised medical procedure aimed at every single member of society, vaccination offered an important contribution to the contemporary processes of the professionalisation of medicine and the medicalisation of society. These processes are crucial to understanding medical responses to vaccination, even as vaccine

technology, scientific theories of disease, and public opinion developed and changed. Public responses ranged from pro- to anti-vaccinationism, but the majority of people fell between these two extremes, altering their support over time in accordance with individual assessments of risk versus benefit. Issues of citizenship, political ideology, and expertise informed these decisions.

The roles of, and relationships between, the state, the medical profession and the public both informed and were affected by the vaccination debate, as these groups negotiated the limits of state intervention, individual liberty, and medical expertise in relation to public health. Although Victoria and Tasmania introduced conscientious objection clauses, effectively repealing compulsion, the issues raised by vaccination continued to resonate within wider political and social debates.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Producing a doctoral dissertation turned out to be a remarkably difficult exercise, and I could never have done it alone. I wish to thank the following people for their support, criticism, and encouragement:

My supervisors, Prof. Michael Bennett and Dr. Stefan Petrow, for reading my many drafts, and providing invaluable criticism and guidance;

Michael Berry, Emily Flint, Elisse McWhirter, Robyn Chisholm, Jill Chisholm, Jane Anderson, Meredith Reeve, Nick Brodie, and Elisabeth Wilson, for their constant support and looking up references when I was far away;

My family, friends and colleagues, for their unwavering belief – despite mounting evidence to the contrary – that I was going to pull it off.

I am also grateful to the staff of the libraries and archives I visited in the course of my research: the Archives Office of Tasmania, the Crowther Library at the State Library of Tasmania, the National Library of Australia, the Mitchell Library, the State Records of New South Wales at both Kingswood and the Rocks, the Public Record Office of Victoria, the State Library of Victoria, the Robarts Library and Gerstein Science Information Centre at the University of Toronto, and, of course, the combined libraries of the University of Tasmania.

This thesis is dedicated to:

John Robinson McWhirter (2/3/1927 – 5/2/2005)

Jean Mary Chisholm (11/2/1919 – 16/7/2005)

Alan John McWhirter (13/12/1957 – 11/1/2008)

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ABBREVIATIONS

Archives Office of Tasmania	AOT
<i>Australian Dictionary of Biography</i>	<i>ADB</i>
<i>Australasian Medical Gazette</i>	<i>AMG</i>
<i>Australian Medical Journal</i>	<i>AMJ</i>
British Medical Association	BMA
Central Board of Health	CBH
Legislative Assembly	LA
Legislative Council	LC
<i>Medical Journal of Australia</i>	<i>MJA</i>
Medical Officer of Health	MOH
<i>New South Wales Parliamentary Debates</i>	<i>NSWPD</i>
<i>New South Wales Parliamentary Papers</i>	<i>NSWPP</i>
<i>New South Wales Votes and Proceedings</i>	<i>NSWV&P</i>
Public Records Office of Victoria	PROV
State Records of New South Wales	SRNSW
<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>	<i>SMH</i>
<i>Tasmanian Parliamentary Papers</i>	<i>TPP</i>
<i>Victorian Parliamentary Debates</i>	<i>VPD</i>
<i>Victorian Parliamentary Papers</i>	<i>VPP</i>
<i>Victorian Votes and Proceedings</i>	<i>VV&P</i>
Western Sydney Record Centre	WSRC