

Phyllis Ashworth

21 April 1902 – 16 June 1996

The following is an edited version of an obituary by Alf Barnett, published in the Age on 22 July 1996.



Delegates to the AFUW National Conference, held in Melbourne in 1959. Phyllis Ashworth was Organising Secretary for this conference; she is standing at the end of the fifth row on the far right.

Phyllis Ashworth was one of Australia's first medical scientists, and an active participant in university women's affairs. She was a member of the Australian Federation of University Women for many years, an officer at both state and federal levels, and a strong supporter of the International Federation of University Women.

Ashworth came from a distinguished family. Her grandfather, Thomas Ashworth, was one of the first doctors to graduate from Melbourne University in 1869. Her uncle was co-designer of Flinders Street Railway Station, and her father was Chief Engineer of Ways and Works for the Victorian Railways, and was involved in planning for an underground railway.

Ashworth, the elder daughter of John and Evelyn Ashworth, was educated at the Methodist Ladies College and excelled in her studies and sport. But she resisted her father's suggestion that she follow her grandfather's profession of clinical medicine, and instead graduate as a Bachelor of Science from Melbourne University in 1925. The next year she was appointed to the new Biochemistry Department at the Alfred Hospital.

In those days biochemistry was much more simple than now. The main tests were for determining the level of blood urea (for kidney function) and of blood sugar (to monitor insulin treatment for diabetes) and examination of spinal fluid (for protein). Equipment consisted of test tubes and burettes; no multi-analysers or computers!

Ashworth's duties also included electrocardiography, using the newly acquired Cambridge electrocardiograph which required the patient to sit with both hands and one foot immersed in buckets of salt water.

Her interests later extended to bacteriology, and she accepted a position in London at the British Postgraduate Medical School pursuing bacteriological research.

With the outbreak of World War II Ashworth returned to Melbourne, and spent most of the war years working with the Commonwealth Munitions Service, vetting personnel working with high explosives and radioactive material. She was then appointed as a bacteriologist at St Vincent's Hospital and resumed her research.

Outside of her research, Ashworth was involved with a number of women's organisations in Melbourne. She joined the Lyceum Club at an early age and was convenor of the Travel Circle at the club. She was state president of the Australian Federation of University Women (Victoria) for two years in the early 1960s, and as federal vice-president, she led the Australian delegation to the International Federation of University Women in Mexico City in 1962. She resigned from AFUW at the age of 93.

Phyllis Ashworth lived a full and productive life and retained her interest and mental alertness until she died after a short illness of only a few days.

GRADUATE WOMEN VICTORIA