Family history and mental health records in Western Australia

Many people are now tracing their family history and finding relatives who were at one time patients in a mental hospital in Western Australia, or who worked there as staff. It can be surprising or even traumatic to discover this, especially if this aspect of your family history was not discussed.

Admissions to mental facilities, especially in the early twentieth century, were not always for what we would consider today to be ‘mental illnesses’. Instead, they were often physical illness such as tertiary syphilis, epilepsy or chronic infections. Older adults were admitted with dementia, as were children with congenital and developmental disabilities. Some people were institutionalised simply because they were very poor and had no other family to care for them.

Our ways of thinking about mental illness have changed, and many of these physical illnesses are now treatable. Many other mental health problems can also now be managed by different services. Below are some resources which may help you find out more about your relative’s diagnosis and their time in the mental health system.

**Tracing former patients**

**State Records Office of Western Australia**

The SRO is located on the ground floor of the Alexander Library building, Perth (near the Art Gallery). It holds many records for Fremantle Lunatic Asylum (1865-1909), Claremont Hospital for the Insane/Claremont Mental Hospital (1909-1972), Heathcote (1929-1997) and other WA mental institutions like Whitby Falls, Lemnos and Green Place.

Many of these records are restricted, especially those less than 100 years old, and you need to obtain permission from the WA Department of Health to see them. See the websites below for more information, or contact the Office directly via sro@sro.wa.gov.au or (08) 9427 3360, or by post at: State Records Office, Perth Cultural Centre, Perth WA 6000.


Please collect as much information as possible about your relative before you contact SROWA.

Please also note that due to extensive destruction of old patient records in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, individual case notes may no longer exist.
WA Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages

Under ‘Family History’, this website offers searchable indexes of WA births, deaths and marriages, which can be very helpful. This can give you a date of birth and full name of a relative, and also tell you if they married or not. Deaths at Claremont Hospital were registered in the Claremont district.


If your relative was born interstate: there are online resources that can help you at:


WA Metropolitan Cemeteries Board, 1899 - present

This site can help you to find out a person’s full name and approximate age when they died. Many destitute patients, or those with no family, were buried directly at Karrakatta Cemetery, close to Claremont Hospital. Those with a family able to provide for them were sometimes buried in other cemeteries such as Fremantle. Not all graves are still marked, but it is possible to find a gravesite by using the interactive website. The colour maps of each cemetery will help you to locate the final resting place of a relative.

http://www.mcb.wa.gov.au/research

WA Post Office Directories, 1893-1949

These invaluable resources have recently been digitised, and can be searched by year. If you want to find where a specific person lived, look in the Alphabetical Directory for each year, which will often give their address and sometimes their occupation.


Graylands Health Campus

Graylands holds records for patients admitted to Claremont Mental Hospital from 1903. Many earlier records have been destroyed, but in most cases the admissions papers for the patients have survived and are preserved on microfilm.

If you are a relative of a patient, you may be able to access some of these records under the Freedom of Information Act 1992 by following the process set in place for this. You are welcome to contact the Area Freedom of Information Coordinator, North Metropolitan Health Service Mental Health, to make further inquiries.

Contact: Graylands Hospital Switchboard (08) 9347 6600.

FOI application forms are also available for collection at Fitzroy House, Graylands Hospital.

| Please collect as much information as possible about your relative before you contact the FOI Officer. |
| Please also note that due to extensive destruction of old patient records in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, individual case notes may no longer exist. |
Tracing Former Staff

It is more difficult to find information on former staff members, especially male nursing staff. Before 1906, WA’s Blue Books and Public Service Lists (you can find these at the State Library of Western Australia, Alexander Library building, Perth) listed all public service employees, including nurses and attendants, but after 1906 nursing staff in WA’s hospitals were not listed due to the specialised nature of their work. Only senior medical and nursing staff are listed after 1906.

NMHS MH

NMHS MH currently has some archival material which includes the following registers:

• Claremont Female Staff Movements 1901-1953
• Register of Mental Nursing Certificates, 1905-1960s – male and female staff

These may help you to trace a relative who was a staff member at Claremont.

Contact: Sarah Howell, (08) 9347 6411, Sarah.Howell@health.wa.gov.au

See above also for the State Records Office of Western Australia and WA Post Office Directories, 1893-1949, which may also help you to find former staff.

More general resources

Department of Child Protection - Freedom of Information

The Department for Child Protection has records for state wards and other children separated from their families for various reasons.

Telephone: (08) 6217 6388 or (08) 6217 6381 & 1800 000 277 (free call in WA)
Facsimile: (08) 9222 2776
Email: foi@dcp.wa.gov.au


National Archives of Australia

These records may contain information on Repatriation Commission patients (former servicemen and women invalided with mental problems), and also on overseas-born mental patients who were later deported from Australia.

http://www.naa.gov.au/ - go to ‘Search the Collection’
National Library of Australia TROVE

The Digitised Newspapers collection is particularly helpful in finding information about individuals. You can restrict your search to Western Australian newspapers if you wish.


State Library of Western Australia

This library has extensive genealogical resources and an online catalogue: try searching for 'Graylands' and 'Claremont Mental Hospital'. The J S Battye Library, on the 3rd floor, is devoted exclusively to Western Australian history.


Find and Connect Project

This national project has been set up to help former institutionalised children to trace their records and to find out more about the institutions in which they lived. It is also a useful resource for anyone with an interest in the history of out-of-home care in Australia.

http://www.findandconnect.gov.au

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This document can be made available in alternative formats on request for a person with a disability.

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