



Eureka Heinrich

Good Neighbours and Good Doctors: volunteers and migrant health in the 1950s and 1960s

While medical literature constructed an official knowledge of migrant health problems in the early postwar years, volunteers worked behind the scenes to identify and address migrants' health needs. Paying attention to this unpaid labour illuminates experiences of health and the politics of health care in postwar Australia in the decades before multiculturalism. This paper explores these themes through two case studies - a nationwide government-designed volunteer body to assimilate New Australians, and a small, migrant-run centre which offered free specialist care. Records of the Good Neighbour federal conferences reveal that medical care was a constant concern of state chapters, ranging from the hygiene and medical needs of male railway workers to the clothing needs of expectant mothers and the translation needs of migrants without knowledge of their social services entitlements. The Migrant Medical Centre in Sydney's King's Cross was a smaller, anti-establishment initiative of several migrant community leaders, businesses and religious groups, all driven by the leadership of a very determined refugee doctor from Germany. The Centre met with scepticism and suspicion from the BMA and government departments yet managed to operate a multi-lingual free service for over a year. The flurry of criticism that accompanied its financial crisis in 1962 established a new discourse in migrant health. Rather than troublesome patients who had failed to assimilate, mainstream newspapers, migrant leaders, doctors and patrons claimed the right of migrants to access health care in their own language. An unnamed

specialist at the Centre said it best when he told the press that it served “a vital community need”.