



Diana Carmody

Almoner to Social Worker: Alms to Action

The first social worker employed in a hospital in NSW was Stella Davies who had been sent to study in England by the Board of the Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children (RAHC). She began working as an almoner in 1933 at the RAHC (Camperdown). Soon after, also in 1933, Norma Parker established an almoners' department at St Vincent's hospital, Melbourne. In 1936, Parker moved to Sydney and set one up at St Vincent's, there. The medical view of the almoner's role included helping identify social factors contributing to illness or impeding treatment, intervening in the patient's environment and assisting in restoring both patient and family to health.

Hospitals, then critically dependent on donations, also needed to determine which households were genuinely unable to pay to see a doctor which was also assessed by almoners. Paediatrics was altering: family-centered casework, counselling and resourcing for each patient and family were becoming priorities with almoners advocating for changes in both the medical setting and the community.

During my more than 30 years, first as an almoner and, later, a social worker, at the RAHC, I have witnessed huge changes in medicine and surgery, with wonderful results. The move of the hospital to Westmead, the demographic centre of Sydney, occurred soon after the adoption of such improvements in holistic care as 24-hour visiting for parents and carers, accommodation for rural families and enhanced attention to chronic illness, as well as such community-based services as Centrelink and the Isolated Patient and Accommodation scheme. Clinically, social workers operate alongside other allied health professionals to achieve the best outcome for everyone; nevertheless, we retain our rôle as advocates for families and patients both within the hospital and in the community.