



**AUSTRALIAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION
(SOUTH AUSTRALIA) INC**

Dr William Lawson, AMA(SA) President 1978- 1979

June 1979 marked the centenary of the South Australian Branch of the Australian Medical Association, which until 1962 was still a branch of the British Medical Association.

A book *A Centenary History* was published in May 1981 to mark the historic occasion. The publication dealt with the major events, which have affected the medical profession and influenced the Branch's development since doctors first arrived when the colony was proclaimed in 1836, well before it gained statehood.

Several other celebrations were held in 1979 to commemorate the hundredth anniversary including the revival of the Listerian Oration. The Governor-General of Australia, Sir Zelman Cowen, a constitutional lawyer delivered the Centenary Oration in the Bonython Hall. His address entitled "Law and Society" forecast some of the major problems which would confront the professions as they embarked on relatively new and untrodden paths in the 1980s. The special Centenary Dinner was well attended and hailed as a great success.

The first of our series of presidential highlights comes from Dr William Lawson, President of the AMA(SA) 1978 – 1979.

"One of the greatest difficulties confronting the profession at the time stemmed from the method of health delivery imposed on the public by successive governments of either political persuasion since the introduction of the National Health Scheme (NHS) by Sir Earl Page in 1956 and subsequent frequent modifications. The unexpected consequence was the rapid escalation of the health care cost. The demand for services steadily increased, as did the introduction of new techniques and expensive equipment.

The Branch spent considerable time deliberating over matters of the State's rural health policy, one major difficulty being that of attracting sufficient numbers of well-trained doctors to country areas. Dr Bob Cooter, himself once a country practitioner who had a good understanding of the problem, headed a subcommittee which doggedly pursued all means of tackling the dilemma.

Undoubtedly, the most controversial subject to come before Branch Council at the end of the 1970s was the vexed question of prepaid health plans, or PPHs. A study group was appointed in South Australia with a Federal grant to the AMA Federal Council for the group to research and report on the PPH system of health care operating sparsely in the United States at the time but untried in Australia.

The system involved the payment to doctors on a capitation basis rather than fee-for-service in the total health care of limited communities where the doctors and other health workers were rewarded for their ability to prevent ill health. This had a theoretical advantage of being more cost effective and predictable but the study group, which planned to introduce a pilot study for evaluation of its worth, ran into serious opposition, which eventually led to the abandonment of the scheme altogether.

Constant changes in the national Health Scheme medical benefits schedules led to special meetings of doctors one Sunday morning to discuss the vexed question of bulk billing, a matter that remained controversial for the next generation or so.



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In its centenary year, the business of the Branch had proceeded smoothly considering the range and complexity of the issues that had come before it. The Branch Council had preformed its task well but a great credit is due to the well organised secretariat under the leadership of Mr Ian Dobbie, ably assisted by Mrs Tina Evans.