

# Dr Helen Sexton's Hôpital Australien de Paris, July–December 1915

Hannah Steel

## Introduction

The First World War was undoubtedly a key moment in the development of French-Australian relations, not simply because Australians fought in French theatres of war, but because it was from that time that the newly-federated Australia can be seen as seeking to interact with some European powers in its own right as a country. One woman who helped forge such connections was Melbourne's Dr Helen Sexton (1862–1950), a highly skilled surgeon who, as part of a team of five Australian women, established and ran the Hôpital Australien in Paris. Through their work in France, they carved out for themselves a small, but nevertheless significant, piece of French-Australian history. Thanks to the work of Penny Russell (1988) and others, Helen's early career is partly known in some specialist historical circles. She graduated from the University of Melbourne's medical school in 1892, five years after she had been instrumental in the hard-fought yet ultimately successful campaign to admit women to the course.<sup>1</sup>

---

To cite this article: Steel, Hannah, 'Dr Helen Sexton's Hôpital Australien de Paris, July–December 1915', *The French Australian Review*, n° 68 (Winter 2020).

<sup>1</sup> 'Testamur of Helen Sexton, Bachelor of Medicine', University of Melbourne (Trinity College Archives, TA 001/ Series 4, AT 001772, 1892); 'Testamur of Helen Sexton, Bachelor of Surgery', ed. University of Melbourne (Trinity College Archives, TA 001/Series 4, AT001773, 1892); Faculty of Medicine, 'Faculty of Medicine Minutes, June 1876–October 1890' in *Faculty of Medicine Minute Books 2 June 1876–18 November 1971, 16 vol.*, University of Melbourne Archives.



Women medical students, University of Melbourne, 1887. Helen Sexton is in the back row, far left.  
Available online at the University of Melbourne Archives (1994.0044.00001).

Her subsequent career as one of Australia's first medical women was one of struggle against prejudice, but also one of great success as she was involved in the formation of the Victorian Medical Women's Society, the Queen Victoria Hospital, and was also the first female appointed as surgeon at the Women's Hospital (*The Argus* 1899; Kelly 1985; Russell 1997). Dr Sexton rapidly won for herself a reputation as a skilled surgeon, even being labelled by *Punch* magazine as 'the head of the women [sic] medical profession in Melbourne' (*Punch* 1909, 360).

Despite her renown in Melbourne, the detail of Helen's medical work during the First World War remains little known. To date, the work by Heather Sheard and Ruth Lee (2019) includes the most detailed study of Helen's war work. However, while it does draw on primary source material from the hospital, it does not attempt to go much further than stating the details of her war service and the nature of her work. Importantly, no known research has examined the series of French-Australian connections Helen developed as an Australian female doctor venturing to Europe and opening a hospital for French soldiers.

This article will argue that Helen's war work remains a powerful symbol of the way in which the war gave rise to a new dimension in the relations between France and Australia. These relations were threefold. Firstly, they were of a bureaucratic and military nature as Helen created a place for herself as an Australian woman within the French military system. Secondly, Helen created personal relationships with the French doctors at the hospital and with the French soldiers she cared for. Finally, Helen created a link between the French and Australian publics as they were united in their praise of her medical work and generous spirit.

To illustrate the existence—and significance of—these connections at a bureaucratic, personal, and public level, this article will draw on primary sources relating to Helen's war service, many of which have not yet been fully examined in existing literature. Particular attention will be given to French and Australian newspaper articles, the letters of recommendation written for Helen's medical service in 1915 by notables of Melbourne society and held today by Monash Health, and also her handwritten medical casebook of notes from the Hôpital Australien, held by the University of Melbourne's Medical History Museum. Essentially, these sources in particular have left a trace of those important French-Australian links Helen forged before, during and immediately after her wartime journey to Europe. These particular links, as well as Helen's wartime service, have received little attention from historians to date and this article will go some way towards redressing this gap.

### **Bureaucratic and military connections**

From the beginning of Australia's entry into the First World War in August 1914, Helen was an active and generous supporter of the Allied war effort. National newspapers reported her charitable donations to war funds, including several Red Cross societies (*The Argus* 1914, 1915a; *The Age* 1914). As well as providing monetary donations Helen worked on several committees that organised war efforts, such as one to collect blankets for Belgians (*Weekly Times* 1914); she was also a member of Charlotte Crivelli's French Red Cross Society in Melbourne (*Snowy River Mail* 1915; Nettelbeck 2015).

Despite having retired from active medical practice to lessen the strain of her work and because of a desire to tour Europe, Helen was not content

for her contribution to be a purely monetary or charitable one. Not long after the war broke out, she offered her medical services to the Australian government, specifically 'to equip and run a hospital as a woman's [sic] unit' (*The Land* 1928). The response was a clear and uncompromising 'no'. As national newspapers reported at the time, all female doctors wishing to serve overseas were flatly rejected, for 'it has been decreed by the military authorities here that no women doctors will be accepted for active military service' (*Western Mail* 1915a, 31). Instead, the role for female doctors was limited to carrying on medical work at home and replacing the medical men who enlisted (Neuhaus 2014). It would not be until the Second World War in October 1939 that women would obtain the right to even temporary medical posts in the Royal Army Medical Corps (Pearn 2014, xi).

Faced with this official rejection, Helen began seeking other channels through which she still might serve overseas. As Mary Masson, a friend of Helen's and wife of Professor Orme Masson at the University of Melbourne, wrote in a letter to English surgeon Sir Frederick Treves, 'There's no opening for her with our own army medical, so she is off to see whether she can be taken on in some reasonably responsible way elsewhere' (Masson 1915b).

Dr Sexton's original idea was to serve with British forces (Allen 1915a; Allen 1915b), but not necessarily in France. This can be traced through the collection of letters of recommendation written in 1915 that she used to attempt to secure herself a medical position, for she was 'anxious to offer her services in any capacity in which they can be of use' (G. L. Stanley 1915). These letters are indicative of two important things. Firstly, they are evidence that Helen was not content to sit quietly and wait for an opportunity to come to her but instead worked actively to mobilise her medical and personal connections to make her goal a reality. Secondly, they show that refusing the services of women doctors was an official position only. It is evident that those who knew Helen, including highly regarded medical academics, believed she possessed the skill and character to serve in wartime.

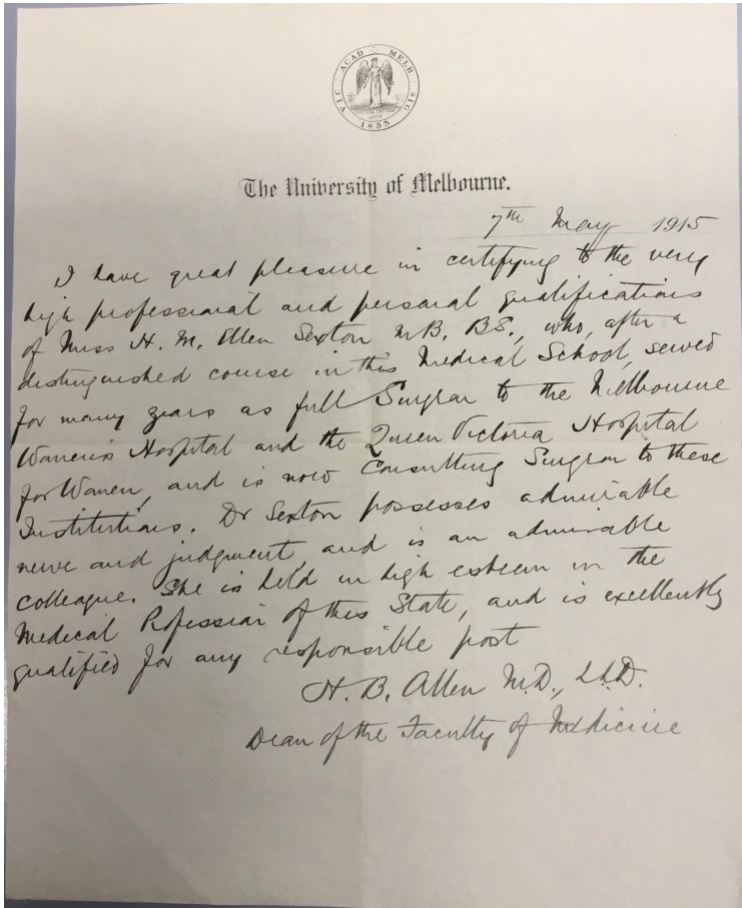
It is important to note that this situation was not unique to Dr Sexton, as many Australian medical women similarly worked to find their own ways in which they could serve overseas, without belonging to the Australian military. In all, there were fifteen Australian female doctors who served in all theatres of war, some with the British Royal Army Medical Corps,

such as Vera Scantlebury at the all-female staffed Endell Street Military Hospital in London, and others such as Agnes Bennett with the Scottish Women's Hospitals (Neuhaus 2013). These women worked with determination, skill and bravery; one among them, Phoebe Chappell, was the first Australian woman and first female doctor to receive a Military Medal for her gallantry under bombardment in France (Neuhaus and Mascall-Dare 2013). So too did many Australian nurses serve outside of the Australian military, such as the 'Bluebirds', twenty-one Australian nurses who worked in French hospitals as part of the Red Cross (Oppenheimer 1993). Oppenheimer estimates that there were more than 500 Australian nurses who served outside the Australian Army Nursing Service. Helen Sexton was one of these many women who, determined to serve, forged their own way in order to contribute to the Allied cause.

Aware that impressive connections would be necessary to secure a medical post as a woman, Dr Sexton used her position as a leading Australian surgeon and a wealthy society member to secure recommendations from prominent individuals. Among the most eminent were the Chief Justice, Sir John Madden (1915); the wife of the Governor General, Lady Helen Munro Ferguson (1915), who founded the Australian branch of the British Red Cross Society; the Governor of Victoria, Lord Stanley (1915), and his wife Lady Margaret Stanley (1915). Written on official Commonwealth of Australia stationery, these letters appeared to carry the authority of the state behind them. Others who wrote to recommend Helen were leading military men, such as Vice Admiral Sir William Creswell (1915) and Colonel R. H. Fetherston (1915), as well as eminent academics at the University of Melbourne with whom Helen had remained in contact, including Harry Brookes Allen (1915a, b), the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and also Mary Masson (1915a, b), wife of the Professor of Chemistry. The addressees were of a similarly high standing within Britain, including politicians Sir George Stanley (Madden 1915), and Arthur Stanley (G. L. Stanley 1915), President of the British Red Cross in London; highly acclaimed surgeons, such as Sir Rickman Godlee (Allen 1915b); Sir Frederick Treves (Masson 1915b), and Sir Anthony Bowlby (Allen 1915a); and the Secretary of the British Red Cross Association (1915). All letters praised Helen's highly distinguished medical career, as Sir John Madden (1915) summarised:

Dr Sexton has held a distinguished position in her profession for the last 21 years. During 10 years she held the position of Honorary Surgeon of the Women's Hospital and of the Queen Victoria Hospital and on resigning these positions she was appointed Honorary Consulting Surgeon of these Institutions.

The letters all warmly stated that Dr Sexton was capable of undertaking war work—W. R. Creswell (1915) wrote: 'I feel sure that no one more useful in this particular line, in our time of trial, could be suggested'.



Reproduced with kind permission of Monash Health.



Armed only with her references, ‘Dr. Helen Sexton went off independently to help’, sailing for London aboard the *RMS Mooltan* on May 18, 1915 (*Western Mail* 1915b, 40; *Western Mail* 1915a). She travelled without the backing of the Australian authorities, and with no firm plan in place for the precise nature of the work she was to undertake. Some newspapers at the time believed that she had in mind to travel on to France and serve with the Red Cross in some capacity; however, there is no clear evidence about Helen’s precise destination when she left Australia (*The Herald* 1915a).

Eventually, it was indeed France and not Britain where Dr Sexton spent her overseas war service. It was the beginning of July 1915 when Helen finally found a way to serve in the war after joining forces with Mrs William Smith, a nurse from Melbourne, who was also travelling to Europe with the intention to serve (*The Argus* 1915). News reached Melbourne soon after that both ladies were remaining in France, indicating that their services had been accepted (*The Argus* 1915b). The task they were to perform was formidable: with the consent of the French government and the tireless aid of Suzanne Caubet, a senior volunteer administrator at the Buffon Hospital in Paris and Charlotte Crivelli’s older sister (Caubet 1915), Helen and Mrs Smith opened their own hospital in Paris. Again, while still a worthy feat, this was not an unusual occurrence during the war, as many women of all nationalities established their own hospitals or worked in them. Their hospital, approved on 1 July, was officially named the Hôpital Bénévole 5<sup>bis</sup> Hôpital Australien, more affectionately known as the Hôpital Australien de Paris (Olier 2010, 105). The hospital was to operate as a voluntary hospital linked to the French hospital, Val-de-Grâce, one of Paris’ most important and prestigious military hospitals (Tournoux 2006). After the signing of the lease for the house on 15 July, the first wounded men arrived just one week later on 22 July (*The Mercury* 1915b). The official inauguration of the hospital by the British Ambassador to Paris took place with much pomp and ceremony on the steps of the hospital on 4 August, and was attended by notables from both French and British society (*L’Écho d’Alger* 1915; *Le Figaro* 1915; *Journal des Débats Politiques et Littéraires* 1915; *Le Gaulois* 1915). This British involvement is a reminder of Australia’s dependence on Britain for foreign affairs activities at the time; however, as will be examined further, Helen, her companions, and the Australian public repeatedly emphasised that this was a specifically Australian undertaking.

Throughout the hospital's six months of operation, the links between Australia and France were evident. Firstly, it was a French hospital established and operated by five Australian women, with the aid of Suzanne Caubet. Dr Sexton was in medical charge of the hospital, with its official record listing her position as 'Médecin-chef: Dr Sexton, de l'ouverture à la fermeture'.<sup>2</sup> Mrs Smith, herself a trained nurse and founding member of the Alliance Française in Melbourne, undertook the management of the staff and the business side of the hospital as well as acting as matron (*Queensland Figaro* 1915; *The Argus* 1915c; *Punch* 1915). Three other Australians assisted them in their tasks: Mrs Smith's two daughters, Lorna and Alison, who served as nurses and undertook domestic duties, and Helen's close friend Mrs Robert Blackwood, who also worked as a nurse and orderly (*Wangaratta Chronicle* 1915). Together, these five women were responsible for the upkeep and operation of the hospital, including its finances. As was reported in *Punch* (1915), 'The whole establishment, including equipment, clothes for men and whole upkeep is entirely provided by five Australian women' in what was a totally voluntary effort. It appears, however, that this did not always operate without problems. Writing to her sister Charlotte Crivelli, Suzanne Caubet (1915) noted tensions between Dr Sexton and Mrs Blackwood, and Mrs Smith and her daughters over the hospital's costs, with the former insinuating that the latter were not paying their fair share. Nevertheless, the astonishing speed with which the hospital was established, equipped and ready to accept patients was a testament to the hard work of the women organisers. *Clio* magazine (1915, 10) in Australia praised this worthy feat:

Think of a handful of women arriving in a foreign country with only a working knowledge of the language at their command, and in less than three weeks furnishing and equipping a hospital.

The hospital was located at 46 Rue du Dr Blanche, in Auteuil.<sup>3</sup> The building itself was a private house that had previously been used as a young ladies' college, a mansion surrounded by large gardens. *Punch* magazine (1915, 32) described it as an idyllic place, 'a comfortable villa, situated in wide grounds,

---

<sup>2</sup> 'Hôpital Australien', *Ministre de la Défense, Musée du Service de Santé des Armées*, 1917.

<sup>3</sup> 'Hôpital Australien', *Ministre de la Défense, Musée du Service de Santé des Armées*, 1917.



and provided with every comfort'. Dr Sexton (1915b) was content with the location as well, calling it 'a beautiful and ideal place for the hospital'. As a private, voluntary establishment the hospital itself was small in size, counting only '21 beds–25 at a stretch' (Sexton 1915b).<sup>4</sup> The five Australian women enjoyed a measure of material comfort, being provided with a house next door where they lived with a 'femme de ménage', although they shared the costs of this too (Sexton 1915b).

An important aspect of the Hôpital Australien was that it operated officially as part of the French military. As mentioned, although Dr Sexton was the medical officer in charge, an official French administrator, M. de Riensi, a lawyer invalided out of the conflict, was appointed to the hospital to take care of the paperwork on the military side (Caubet 1915). In addition, three male surgeons from the larger Buffon Hospital were appointed to work alongside Helen, namely Drs Letulle, Legry and Coudray who would give 'leurs soins éclairés aux blessés de l'hôpital australien'<sup>5</sup> (*Le Gaulois* 1915). The hospital itself was also accorded military status and sanctioned by the French War Office, being officially listed among Parisian military hospitals of the First World War with the Department of Defence as an Hôpital Bénévole and complementary hospital to Val-de-Grâce (*The Mercury* 1915a). The Australian press reported on the surprise of the five women involved that the French government were so accepting of their services, stating that 'all the ladies concerned in the enterprise speak with gratitude, and not unmingled with surprise, of the generous confidence which the French military authorities have reposed in them' (*The Mercury* 1915b). So too did Madge Donohoe (*The Globe and Sunday Times War Pictorial* 1915, 16), who reported the ladies as saying that they came 'prepared for much red-tape in France, and to our astonishment found less here than in Australia, at least so far as the employment of women in a medical capacity by the War Department is concerned'. Not only did France formally accept the Australian Hospital as a part of its own Service de Santé des Armées, but also in an unprecedented move, Helen received the military title of Médecin-Majeur de 1<sup>ère</sup> classe, a major within the medical corps (*Bendigo Advertiser* 1915).

---

<sup>4</sup> 'Hôpital Australien', *Ministre de la Défense, Musée du Service de Santé des Armées*, 1917.

<sup>5</sup> 'their enlightened care to the wounded men in the Australian hospital'.

The French military authorities awarded this recognition to British women serving in French military hospitals according to the nature of their positions (*West Australian* 1915). It was appropriate that Helen held such a military rank because this gave her the necessary authority to run the hospital, and in turn she was expected to perform certain duties, such as presenting a military medal. Recorded in her casebook (1915) as 'Decorated by me with Med Mil', Helen presented Corporal François Philippe with the Médaille Militaire and the Croix de Guerre on the steps of the hospital in December 1915, an award given to recognise his bravery after lying wounded by a shell behind enemy lines for ten days (which led to the amputation of a leg) (*Observer* 1916). Many newspapers in Australia reported on the special occasion:

An interesting ceremony took place at the Australian Hospital at Auteuil, when Dr. Helen Sexton presented French soldiers [in fact only one] with military medals and the Cross of War. This is the first time a lady doctor has been honoured by the French government with a request to present medals (*Daily Telegraph* 1915, 5).<sup>6</sup>

It appears that Helen was the first ever woman aside from a Queen to be asked to present a military medal, which is evidence that, despite her unusual position of being Australian and female, she was regarded as a senior military officer and taken seriously by her superiors (*The Week* 1916). For the purposes of this article, it is important to question why the French military so readily accepted Helen and her hospital, and why in fact she chose Paris as a place to serve. Just how did these links come to be formed between the French military and a small band of Australian medical women with Helen at their helm? It seems probable that some very active members of the French community in Melbourne were key to connecting Helen to the French military authorities and convincing her to serve in France. Helen was herself part of this community, as a member of the French Red Cross Society in Melbourne (*Snowy River Mail* 1915; *Journal Officiel de la République Française* 1919). It is further evident from letters she wrote during the war that the French community in Melbourne remained

---

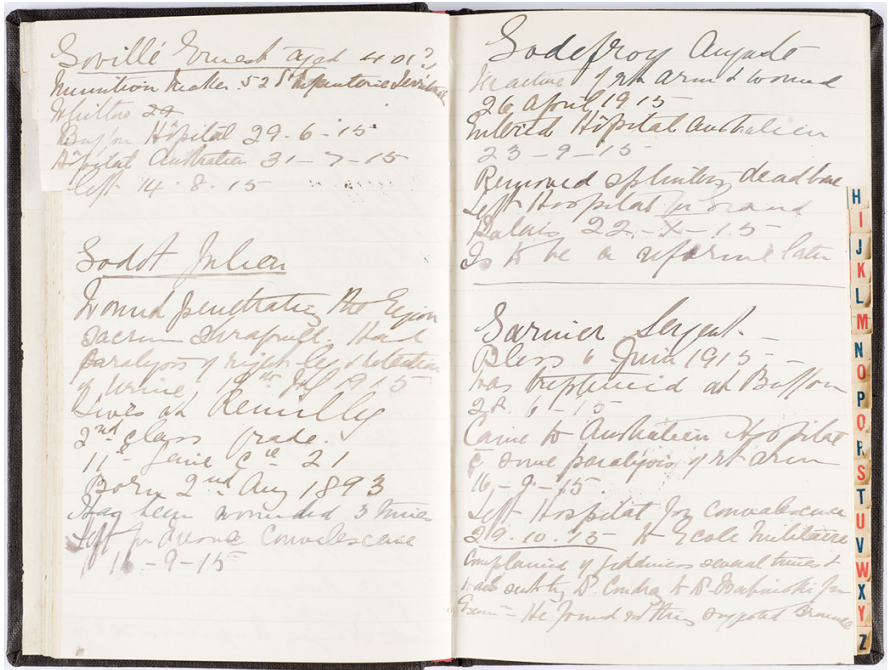
<sup>6</sup> Among others, this was also reported in *National Advocate* 17 December 1915, *Examiner* 17 December 1915, *The Daily News* 16 December 1915 and *The Sydney Stock and Station Journal* 21 December 1915.

informed of, and involved in, the running of the Hôpital Australien. For example, there are a few examples of Helen writing to Charlotte Crivelli, driving-force of the French Red Cross in Melbourne. In one such letter she wrote that the hospital was in urgent need of funds as ‘Surgical work and dressings are expensive, and the men have to be clothed, and supplied with cigarettes, wine, and so forth’ (*Weekly Times* 1916, 13). The French Red Cross responded, and after holding fundraisers such as a fete at Government House and a public subscriptions campaign, sent money to the hospital (*Mildura Telegraph and Darling and Lower Murray Advocate* 1916; *The Herald* 1916; *The Age* 1915).

Overwhelmingly, however, it seems that it was the efforts of Charlotte Crivelli’s sister Suzanne Caubet in France that drove the establishment of the Hôpital Australien, forming its female staff, and maintenance of supply to the hospital once it was operational. Also, as a volunteer administrator at the Buffon hospital who worked closely with its staff and patients, it is likely that Suzanne was responsible for providing Helen with a position there after the Hôpital Australien closed. Suzanne’s letters to Charlotte also indicate that she personally organised a lot of the supply to the hospital, including trunks that were sent over from Australia, as well as using her three Parisian workrooms of women to make shirts, jackets and socks for the men at the Hôpital Australien (Caubet 1915). It was also to Suzanne that the five Australian women at the hospital turned to discuss their concerns about its operation, demonstrating that she was seen as its manager (Caubet 1915). Suzanne clearly viewed herself in this light, complaining bitterly to her sister that the French press had neglected to mention her major role in the hospital’s establishment (Caubet 1915). Clearly, the Melbourne French community at home and abroad, especially the sisters Suzanne and Charlotte, was pivotal in establishing the hospital as a part of the French system, finding roles for Dr Sexton and the other women and continuing the daily running of the hospital. These personal connections and the fact that, as a major combatant nation, France was experiencing acute shortages of medical personnel (Larcan 2008), can go some way in explaining why the French military was more welcoming of Dr Sexton’s services compared to its Australian counterpart.

**Personal connections**

That the Hôpital Australien was accepted by the French military was a connection made at a bureaucratic level, but on a day-to-day basis the links Helen created in France were of a much more personal nature. A valuable source that gives insight into Dr Sexton's time as doctor at the Hôpital Australien is her medical casebook (Sexton 1915a), written by hand in an address book from July to December 1915 during the months the hospital was operational.<sup>7</sup> Although inconsistent, Helen recorded many details of her patients and treatments including but not limited to their names, admission dates, battles they were wounded in, their injuries and treatment, as well as summary pages of budgets and average lengths-of-stay of patients.



Dr Helen Sexton's Case Notebook from the Hôpital Australien de Paris, 46 Rue du Dr Blanche, Autueil, Paris XVI, 1915.

<sup>7</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all information and citations in this section come directly from this source. No page numbers are indicated in the document. This casebook is currently held at the University of Melbourne's Medical History Museum.

All the fifty-six wounded men Dr Sexton treated were of French nationality. Their ages differed considerably, ranging from nineteen into their forties, and they came from varied disciplines of the military, including infantry, artillery, logistics and munitions making. She often noted where they lived in France, including fifteen from Paris and others from Bordeaux, Clichy, Blois, and Lille. Helen also encountered soldiers from the broader French Empire and made particular mention of men who were not from the *métropole*. One man was ‘An Arab’ and had been segregated ‘in a room with other arabs’ when previously at a larger hospital. Another was listed as a Captain of an Algerian regiment, while a third, with a ‘Native mother French father’ from Tunis, served with a Zouaves regiment and, when presented with his military medal, ‘was decorated in Abyssinian wear + Tunis kilts’. One soldier held a much closer connection to home. From November to December 1915 Helen treated René Crivelli, a decorated artilleryman who was the son of Melbourne’s Dr. Crivelli and Charlotte Crivelli, French immigrants to Australia and long-standing leading figures of French society in Melbourne (Nettelbeck 2015).

Aside from her formal role as their military doctor, Dr Sexton’s casebook demonstrates that she developed genuine and personal connections to the French men under her care. The rare inclusion of non-medical notes on the men shows that their stories of suffering and sacrifice touched her enough to record them. Helen made particular mention of the men who had wives and children and noted down their harrowing stories of separation. For example, Emile Charon ‘...has wife + child...at Lille. No news of them since commencement of war’, and Gaston Deballe ‘has not heard of wife + child...who were at St Quentin for five months during the German occupation’. Helen also recorded the extreme hardship of certain soldiers, such as Léon Clément, who was a prisoner of war in Germany for ten months and another who had fallen into terrible financial hardship before enlisting. Sometimes she would also note things about the men’s lives that interested her personally, such as that Charles Habert was a maker of ‘objets d’art’. Some comments suggested that she took the time to get to know the men on a personal level, such as writing that Gaston Deballe was ‘a decent man’.

The personal relationships Dr Sexton forged in Paris extended to French doctors from other military hospitals. There were three male doctors

appointed to the Hôpital Australien, however Helen mostly made mention of one, Dr Coudray. It seems that he was often present at the Australian Hospital to examine the patients alongside Helen, and she would also consult with him on important decisions. For example, for a wound that was smelling she 'consulted Dr Coudray, who decided to cut further down in case of more bits of clothing', and he also ordered certain treatments for the patients, such as one man being 'ordered by Dr Coudray to be sent to Buffon for the dentist to see him', and another for whom he 'ordered preparation to be made for operation'. He even performed one operation on a patient of Helen's, removing dead bone from a wound.

Helen's casebook also reveals just how closely linked her everyday work was to the bureaucracy and other hospitals that formed the French military medical corps. Firstly, her notes demonstrate that the Hôpital Australien as an 'Hôpital bénévole' was very much a small link in the much bigger chain of French military hospitals, treating patients who were 'petits blessés' after the larger hospitals had dealt with the first-hand emergencies from the frontlines. Only three patients arrived directly to the Hôpital Australien from the battlefield: two men are listed as arriving two days after being wounded and another three days. Another arrived with 'clothes filthy and cut off in bits', presumably direct from the battlefield as well. However, the vast majority of patients had already spent time in other French military hospitals. Thirty-one of the men came from the Buffon Hospital, four from Bégin Hospital, and one each from Val-de-Grâce, Orléans and Bregnat. Eight men's records show they had been admitted to another hospital but Helen did not note which one. Some men had even been admitted to multiple hospitals before their arrival, the most impressive of all being one man with five consecutive hospital stays—at the field hospital, auxiliary hospital 26, the hospital at Bar le Duc, the Louvre and then Buffon.

For some of the men, their hospital stays before arriving at the Australian Hospital were lengthy, with most being two to three months. The longest previous admission was thirteen months. Even once admitted to the Hôpital Australien, the men's care was sometimes shared with other French hospitals, particularly the Buffon. Some of Dr Sexton's patients were taken to the Buffon Hospital to receive more complex treatments that could not be offered at the smaller Hôpital Australien. As Helen admitted in her notes not long after the hospital opened, 'the hospital being opened only 1 week



was not yet equipped for any serious case'. Cases that were referred to the Buffon included removing bone from the stump of an amputated leg, a tooth extraction, a finger amputation, and complex bacteriological treatment for a skin condition. In addition to being well equipped for more serious procedures, the Buffon could also provide more up to date services and technologies, such as electrotherapy and radiography to locate bullets and shrapnel internally (Morillon 2014).

Through the efforts of Suzanne Caubet, a program was organised whereby those patients at the Buffon who were suffering mentally and had no family to visit were driven to the Hôpital Australien to have lunch and spend time in the outskirts of Paris (Caubet 1915). Dr Sexton's co-operation with the French hospital system continued after some patients had finished their time in her care. While some were discharged from service or returned to their regiments, others were transferred from the Hôpital Australien to hospitals such as the Buffon, Grand Palais, Neuilly, or convalescent homes.

Even more importantly, when the Hôpital Australien reached the end of its six-month tenure—it closed its doors to patients on 18 December 1915—Dr Sexton was subsequently granted a position at the Buffon hospital, and Mrs Blackwood was also appointed nurse there (*The Australasian* 1916). Clearly, Dr Sexton had become so much a part of the French military system that even once her own Australian enterprise came to an end, she was easily accepted as a member of the staff of a French military hospital.

Two final points remain to be considered. Firstly, although she worked closely with other hospitals, it is important to stress that Helen also undertook most medical work independently. Her notes describe the treatments that she herself administered, of which the majority appear to have been managing injuries that had not healed from previous treatment. Examples included one man who had 'disloc of shoulder still present', another whose broken arm showed 'no union after 6 weeks', and many instances of wounds that continued to suppurate. Helen would reassess what further treatment was needed for a full recovery, including using massage technique on unhealed fractures, and on one occasion, she cut further into an unhealed wound and found two bits of clothing that had not been removed. Sometimes Helen would be critical of the way patients' injuries had been previously managed. For one man whose broken foot refused to mend she complained that the bones had been 'improperly set', and for another she believed his tendon

damage was 'due to knee being put up bent for 6 weeks'. In such cases, Helen would perform procedures herself.

Some procedures were simple, such as a restitching wounds and applying simple dressings, or removing toe nails from a man who suffered from frostbite. Others were more complicated, such as the operation Helen performed on October 10: 'Removed some dead bone from lower part of wound'. As well as treating previous war injuries, Helen also had to deal with men who developed conditions while they were in the hospital. Such cases included one man who developed 'alveolar periostitis' after he recovered from typhoid, another who developed a mastoid abscess, and one who 'developed broncho pneumonia + pleurisy, coughing blood', a critical condition. Essentially, as a military doctor Helen's work certainly involved close collaboration with other French medical personnel and hospitals, but she was still the medical officer in charge of the Hôpital Australien and to a large extent was left to carry out her duties autonomously.<sup>8</sup>

Also worth considering is just how an Australian woman in France managed to become so heavily enmeshed with French soldiers and staff. It is evident that, at every level of Helen's connections to France, be they with individual patients, doctors, or institutions, French language was the tool with which she could form relationships and negotiate her work. On a practical level, Helen's everyday life was inseparable from the practice of medical work in a foreign country with only partial comprehension of the French language. It is evident that she knew some French, either from previous study, her Melbourne French connections, or learning the relevant terms from being among the French soldiers and working with French doctors. As Madge Donohoe reported, there were 'little language misunderstandings' that sometimes took place between the female staff and the wounded men at the hospital (*The Globe and Sunday Times War Pictorial* 1915, 16), demonstrating that a language barrier certainly existed although it clearly did not prevent the operation of the hospital.

---

<sup>8</sup> It is unclear whether any patients died in Helen's care. One note is made at the end of the casebook that two men who were old cases from the Buffon died, however no mention is made of this in any of the men's individual records. It is likely that, as a hospital for mostly healed and convalescing soldiers, death would have been rare.

Helen's understanding of French is evident in her casebook. Sometimes, she would write entire phrases in French, such as 'Fracture fibula...et plaie du droit bras [sic]', 'Marin mitrailleur brigade de Fusiliers Marins', and 'balle à la cuisse'. Other times her use of the language was more sporadic, such as single words interspersed in her English. She used single French words often to list the soldiers' military units, such as 'infanterie' or 'artillerie', for certain medical terms such as 'panaris' and 'réformé' and finally, for specific/specialist vocabulary, such as the frequent use of 'éclat d'obus'. Some examples of sentences that mixed English and French were the following: 'Fracture on 29-9-15 près Amiens', 'wounded by a balle', and 'blessé 14-7-15 at Bar le Duc'. Often her French spelling was correct, but sometimes she would leave off agreement or use incorrect accents, such as in the phrases 'Bless 6 juin' and 'Evacuè sur Ecole Militaire'. Helen's casebook reveals the difficulties the Australian women faced in running a military hospital in a country where the language and culture were not their own.

### **Public relations**

The notoriety of Dr Sexton's unusual position as an Australian female doctor in France provided a subject of interest to both French and Australian newspaper readers. It is important to consider the reception of the Hôpital Australien and Dr Sexton herself by the general public of these two nations between which she had established a wartime connection. Here, at least, there was a mutual accord as to their praise and respect for the services she rendered to the French wounded.

Although, it was a relatively small hospital, l'Hopital Australien nevertheless figured in the French press, with articles mentioning its opening and inauguration.<sup>9</sup> What these articles convey is the gratitude of a nation for the benevolent work of the Australian women who came of their own volition to heal the French wounded. Notably, H. Fontaine wrote in *Le Gaulois* (1915) of the 'cinq généreuses dames de Melbourne,

---

<sup>9</sup> The author could only find eight French articles mentioning the hospital. These include articles in the *Journal des Débats Politiques et Littéraires* 1915, *Le Temps* 1915, *L'Écho d'Alger* 1915, and *Le Figaro* 1915.

venues apporter l'appoint de leur dévouement et de leur charité à nos soldats,'<sup>10</sup> finishing by stating that 'Nous ne saurons jamais assez remercier nos amis et alliés du bien qu'ils font si intelligemment chez nous, en accord avec la Croix Rouge'.<sup>11</sup> The Marquis de Vogüé, President of the French Red Cross Society, also 'thanked these generous-hearted women, who had come from Australia to bring help and comfort to our wounded soldiers' (*The Herald* 1915b). The soldiers themselves were said to have expressed their thanks to the Australian women for their care. Madge Donohoe, writing for the *Globe and Sunday Times War Pictorial* (1915), recorded one as saying 'Quelle veine d'être venu ici'.

Similarly, just as for the many Australian women doing extraordinary things in all theatres of war, there was an upwelling of Australian patriotic support for the Hôpital Australien in the Australian press. Journalists were keen to emphasise the hospital's connection with Australia, and to insist that these Australian women could prove their worth overseas. Articles made a particular point of stating that the hospital was Australian, with one author even stating, 'this Auteuil mansion with its beautiful grounds is a little bit of Australia in France' (*The Mercury* 1915b). Another article went so far as to ignore the hospital's French management, reporting falsely that 'another hospital under Australian management and patronage has been opened' (*The South-Western News* 1915). Reporting on the official inauguration, Madge Donohoe (*The Globe and Sunday Times War* 1915) exemplified this surge of patriotism by writing ardently that the hospital would prove the merit and quality of Australians internationally, especially in France:

The war has done much to make known to France the real Australia, with its material resources and wealth, the ardour of its people in all righteous causes, their generous help for the oppressed and suffering; and the work of the Australian Hospital in Paris will only strengthen and confirm the good opinion already held by the French nation concerning our southern continent.

---

<sup>10</sup> 'five generous Melbourne women, who came to bring the best of their devotion and charity to our soldiers'.

<sup>11</sup> 'We can never thank our friends and allies enough for the good they do so well for us, in conjunction with the Red Cross'.

Helen appears to have become more of a national heroine than she had already been during her time as a leading female doctor in Melbourne. Likely written as war propaganda to boost morale at home and celebrate Australian beneficence, the articles seem to mythologise her, by praising her ‘excellent surgical work in France’ (*Western* 1915c, 39) for which she ‘worked so nobly and indefatigably’ (*Punch* 1916, 32). One article even referred to her as ‘the honoured wounded soldiers’ fairy godmother’ (*Western Mail* 1915c, 39).

Essentially, Helen became the female heroine in a doctor’s uniform that Australia could boast of:

Every country has its noble army of [medical] women and we can boast of Dr. Helen Sexton, who, with a gallant little band of Australian women, established, equipped, and maintained, the Australian Hospital in France, which has been the admiration of all who have come in contact with it, and which has won for its founder a high distinction from the French Government (*Ringwood and Croydon Chronicle* 1916, 5).

Sadly, however, this public praise of Helen’s exploits—and that of other Australian medical women who served outside the official Australian forces overseas—did not translate into official post-war recognition of her medical contribution in her home country. Female doctors, forced to serve outside official channels, are not recognised on any Australian war memorial of 1914–1918 because they were not part of the Australian Army Medical Corps (Inglis 1987). Thus, in Australia’s national memory of World War One, Dr Helen Sexton is essentially invisible, even today.

By contrast, and in testament to the gratitude felt by the French people and authorities for her dedication to healing the French wounded, Helen was awarded a French military medal. She received the gold level of the *Médaille de Reconnaissance Française*, the highest level possible (*Journal officiel de la République française* 1919, 3395–96; *Revue des Établissements de Bienfaisance et d’Assistance* 1919, 125–26). The reasons for Helen’s award were thus published:

Mme Sexton (Helen), de nationalité anglaise, docteur de la faculté de médecine de Melbourne: depuis le début de la guerre a contribué à la formation du comité de la Croix Rouge française de Victoria; venue en France en 1915, a aidé à l’installation de l’hôpital australien à Auteuil et

y a soigné nos blessés; à la fermeture de cet hôpital est allée à l'hôpital Bouffon où elle a donné avec le plus grand dévouement son temps et ses soins à nos blessés (*Journal officiel de la République française* 1919, 3395–96).<sup>12</sup>

Mrs Blackwood and Mrs Smith, co-founders of the Australian Hospital, also received the medal. Once their medals were posted from France, a reception was held at Government House in November 1919 to present them, but Helen was unable to attend (*The Daily News* 1919; *The Australasian* 1919). This ceremony demonstrated that the only acknowledgement Dr Sexton and her comrades could expect to receive from Australia was merely an extension of the official recognition given by France. News of, and pride in, their service may have been widely circulated through the national press, but it was only through France that their public acknowledgement was formalised.

### Conclusion

Dr Sexton's extraordinary medical work in France eventually came to an end. In December 1915, at the end of its six-month tenure, the Hôpital Australien closed its doors. After a brief appointment at the Hôpital Buffon Dr Sexton took leave of absence—newspapers reported the reason for this leave of absence as a combination of injuring her leg and being overworked after months of running the hospital—and she returned to Australia in October 1916 (*Table Talk* 1916; *Weekly Times* 1916; *The Register* 1916). Throughout the remainder of the war she continued to support the Allied war effort through various charitable efforts including, among others, the French Red Cross in Melbourne (*The Argus* 1917; *The Australasian*, 1918). Evidently, whether she was in Australia or in France, Dr Sexton sustained her generous involvement with the French war effort from the beginning to the end of the war.

---

<sup>12</sup> 'Ms Sexton (Helen), of English nationality, doctor of the Melbourne Faculty of Medicine: from the start of the war contributed to the formation of the committee of the Victorian French Red Cross; came to France in 1915, helped with the installation of the Australian hospital at Auteuil and there healed our wounded; at the closure of that hospital went to the Buffon hospital where, with the greatest devotion, she gave her time and care to our soldiers.'



Dr Sexton is an example of how connections between France and Australia can be fostered both at an individual and community level. As the medical head of one small group of Australian women, she was able to establish a link to the large and official organisation of the French military and its hospital system, but also on a more personal level to the individual wounded soldiers in her care and other French medical personnel alongside whom she worked. Dr Sexton herself realised just how important these small connections were to the war effort. She wrote in a letter to Lady Helen Munro Ferguson (1915b) that ‘The French have an idea that the English are not doing their utmost so I’m inclined to think that individual actions have far more than a direct value’; she also spoke of the potential to ‘stimulate a kindly feeling’ between nations that must work together to emerge victorious in the war. A ‘kindly feeling’ was certainly her wartime legacy, growing as it did from a shared appreciation of her work by the French authorities, the men she treated, the doctors she worked alongside, and members of the French and Australian public who expressed their gratitude and admiration. Her actions, albeit at a grassroots level, mirrored those that were occurring at the level of nations: the building of closer ties between Australia and France in the context of war. Helen Sexton’s Hôpital Australien certainly left behind a little piece of Australia in France.

*The University of Melbourne*

## References

### Books and articles

- Bendigo Advertiser*, ‘Honours for British and Australian Nurses,’ 20 November 1915, p. 4.
- Hobart Mercury*, *Clio*, ‘Hopital Australien de Paris’, 16 October 1915, p. 10.
- Daily Telegraph*, ‘Lady Doctor Honored’, 17 December 1915, p. 5.
- Inglis, Ken, 1987, ‘Men, Women, and War Memorials: Anzac Australia’, *Daedalus*, vol. 116, n° 4, pp. 35–59.

- Journal des Débats Politiques et Littéraires*, 1915, 'Échos', 6 August 1915, p. 2.
- Journal Officiel de la République Française*, 1919, 'Ministre des Affaires Étrangères', 2 April 1919, pp. 3395–96.
- Kelly, Farley, 1985, *Degrees of Liberation: A Short History of Women in the University of Melbourne*, Parkville, The Women Graduates' Centenary Committee of the University of Melbourne.
- Larcan, Alain, & Jean-Jacques Ferrandis, 2008, *Le Service de santé aux armées pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale*, Paris, Éditions LBM.
- L'Écho d'Alger*, 1915, 'Petites Nouvelles', 5 August 1915, p. 2.
- Le Figaro*, 1915, 'Pour Nos Soldats', 4 August 1915, p. 3.
- Le Gaulois*, 1915, 'À l'Hôpital Australien', 5 August 1915, p. 3.
- Le Temps*, 1915, 'À l'Hôpital Australien', 5 August 1915, p. 4.
- Mildura Telegraph and Darling and Lower Murray Advocate*, 1916, 'Lady's Letter', 24 March 1916, p. 4.
- Morillon, Marc, & Jean-François Falabrègues, 2014, *Le Service de Santé 1914–1918*, Paris, Service de Santé des Armées.
- Nettelbeck, Colin, 2015, 'Charlotte Crivelli (1868–1956), Patriot and Fund-Raiser', in Eric Berti and Ivan Barko (eds), *French Lives in Australia*, Melbourne, Australian Scholarly Publishing, pp. 338–52.
- Neuhaus, Susan, 2013, 'Australia's Female Military Surgeons of World War I', *ANZ Journal of Surgery*, vol. 83, n° 10, pp. 713–18.
- Neuhaus, Susan, 2016, 'Surgery: No Profession for a Lady', *ANZ Journal of Surgery*, vol. 86, n° 1– n° 2, pp. 34–8.
- Neuhaus, Susan, & Sharon Mascall-Dare, 2013, 'A Woman At War: The Life and Times of Dr Phoebe Chappell MM (1879–1967), An Australian Doctor on the Western Front', *Journal of Military and Veterans' Health*, vol. 21, n° 3, pp. 40–44.
- Observer*, 'Australian Woman Honored', 5 February 1916, p. 6.
- Olier, François, & Jean-Luc Quéneec'Hdu, 2010, *Hôpitaux militaires dans la guerre de 1914–1918*, vol. 2, Louviers, Ysec Éditions.
- Oppenheimer, Melanie, 1993, 'Gifts for France: Australian Red Cross Nurses in France, 1916–1919', *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 17, n° 39, pp. 65–78.

- Pearn, Major General John, 2014, 'Prologue', in S Neuhaus & S Mascall-Dare (eds), *Not for Glory: A Century of Service by Medical Women to the Australian Army and its Allies*, Brisbane, Boolarong Press, pp. x–xii.
- Punch*, 1909, 'People We Know', 18 March 1909, p. 360.
- Punch*, 1915, 'The Ladies Letter', 21 October 1915, p. 32.
- Punch*, 1916, 'The Ladies Letter', 17 February 1916, p. 32.
- Queensland Figaro*, 1915, 'Australian Hospital in France', 2 October 1915, p. 9.
- Revue des Établissements de Bienfaisance et d'Assistance*, 1919, Librarie Administrative Berger-Levrault, pp. 125–26.
- Ringwood and Croydon Chronicle*, 1916, 'Women and the War', 9 June 1916, p. 5.
- Russell, Emma, 1997, *Bricks or Spirit? The Queen Victoria Hospital Melbourne*, Melbourne, Australian Scholarly Publishing.
- Russell, Penny, 1988, 'Sexton, Hannah Mary Helen (1862–1950)' in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 11, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/sexton-hannah-mary-helen-8389>, retrieved 12 April 2019.
- Sheard, Heather, & Ruth Lee, 2019, *Women to the front: The extraordinary Australian women doctors of the Great War*, North Sydney, Ebury Press.
- Snowy River Mail*, 1915, 'French Red Cross Fund', 7 May 1915, p. 3.
- Table Talk*, 1916, 'Social', 11 May 1916, p. 33.
- The Age*, 1914, 'Red Cross Society', 2 September 1914, p. 8.
- The Age*, 1915, 'Red Cross Council', 20 August 1915, p. 9.
- The Argus*, 1899, 'Women's Hospital', 9 September 1899, p. 13.
- The Argus*, 1914, 'Funds for the War', 2 September 1914, p. 12.
- The Argus*, 1915a, "'The Argus" Special Appeal', 2 March 1915, p. 6.
- The Argus*, 1915b, 'Australian Ladies Open Hospital in France', 9 July 1915, p. 7.
- The Argus*, 1915c, 'Australian Hospital Opened in France', 6 August 1915, p. 8.
- The Argus*, 1917, 'National Funds', 5 April 1917, p. 11.
- The Australasian*, 1916, 'Social Notes', 19 February 1916, p. 36.
- The Australasian*, 1918, 'Social Notes', 9 March 1918, p. 37.

- The Australasian*, 1919, 'Social Notes', 22 November 1919, p. 42.
- The Daily News*, 1919, 'Mainly About People', 28 March 1919, p. 3.
- The Globe and Sunday Times War Pictorial*, 'In Paris: Australian Women's Enterprise Maintaining & Conducting Military Hospital', 9 October 1915, p. 16.
- The Herald*, 1915a, 'The Social Circle', 27 April 1915, p. 3.
- The Herald*, 1915b, 'Nation Grateful', 2 October 1915, p. 9.
- The Herald*, 1916, 'The Social Circle', 21 March 1916, p. 7.
- The Land*, 1928, 'Work of Dr Mary Booth', 10 August 1928, p. 20.
- The Mercury*, 1915a, 'Australian Hospital in France: Major Helene [sic] Sexton', 9 August 1915, p. 6.
- The Mercury*, 1915b, 'Hopital Australien de Paris', 16 October 1915, p. 10.
- The Register*, 1916, 'Concerning People', 13 October 1916, p. 4.
- The South-Western News*, 1915, 'Ian Hamilton's Men: Visit to Australian Hospital', 20 August 1915, p. 3.
- The Week*, 1916, 'Ladies' Page', 18 February 1916, p. 6.
- The West Australian*, 'Woman's World', 12 October 1915, p. 4.
- Tournoux, Pierre, 2006, 'Hôpital d'instruction des armées du Val de Grâce', in Pierre Cristau & Raymond Wey (eds), *Les Hôpitaux Militaires au XXe Siècle*, Paris, Le Cherche Midi, pp. 10–29.
- Wangaratta Chronicle*, 1915, 'From Various Sources', 12 June 1915, p. 7.
- Weekly Times*, 1914, 'Blankets for Belgians', 10 October 1914, p. 9.
- Weekly Times*, 1916, 'Hospital Work in France Praised by Major Sexton', 20 May 1916, p. 13.
- Western Mail*, 1915a, 'A Woman's Melbourne Letter', 28 May 1915, p. 31.
- Western Mail*, 1915b, 'A Woman's Melbourne Letter', 1 October 1915, pp. 39–40.
- Western Mail*, 1915c, 'A Woman's Melbourne Letter', 31 December 1915, p. 39.

### **Archival sources**

- Allen, Harry Brookes, 1915a, letter to Sir Anthony Bowlby, 5 May, Monash Medical Centre, Melbourne.

- Allen, Harry Brookes, 1915b, letter to Sir Rickman Godlee, 7 May, Monash Medical Centre, Melbourne.
- Caubet, Suzanne, 1915, correspondence to Charlotte Crivelli, Crivelli Family Private Collection, courtesy of Mr Michael Crivelli.
- Creswell, W. R., 1915, letter to Captain Collins, 23 April, Monash Medical Centre, Melbourne.
- ‘Faculty of Medicine Minutes, June 1876–October 1890’, in *Faculty of Medicine Minute Books 2 June 1876–18 November 1971, 16 vols*, University of Melbourne, University of Melbourne Archives.
- Ferguson, Helen Munro, 1915, letter to Dr Helen Sexton, 3 May, Monash Medical Centre, Melbourne.
- Fetherston, Colonel R. H., 1915, recommendation letter for Dr Helen Sexton, 21 April, Monash Medical Centre, Melbourne.
- Hôpital Australien*, 1917, Ministre de la Défense, Musée du Service de Santé des Armées, Paris.
- Madden, Sir John, 1915, letter to Sir George Stanley, 22 April, Monash Medical Centre, Melbourne.
- Masson, Mary, 1915a, letter to Dr Helen Sexton, 18 May, Monash Medical Centre.
- Masson, Mary, 1915b, letter to Sir Frederick Treves, 18 May, Monash Medical Centre, Melbourne.
- Sexton, Dr Helen, 1915a, *Index of Cases in Hôpital Australien, July–December 1915*, Australian Medical Association Archive, Medical History Museum, University of Melbourne.
- Sexton, Dr Helen, 1915b, letter to Lady Helen Munro Ferguson, 11 August, *Australian Red Cross Society Correspondence Files*, National Office, University of Melbourne Archives.
- Stanley, G. L., 1915, letter to Arthur Stanley MP, 3 May, Monash Medical Centre, Melbourne.
- Stanley, Margaret, 1915, letter to Dr Helen Sexton, 3 May, Monash Medical Centre, Melbourne.
- Testamur of Helen Sexton, Bachelor of Medicine*, 1892, University of Melbourne, Trinity College Archives, TA 001/ Series 4, AT 001772.
- Testamur of Helen Sexton, Bachelor of Surgery*, 1892, University of Melbourne, Trinity College Archives, TA 001/Series 4, AT001773.