



Dunedin Hospital in the 1880s was a life-threatening insanitary place and the honorary medical staff were pressing the trustees for major reforms. The urge for reform was led particularly by Dr Ferdinand Campion Batchelor, a specialist in abdominal surgery who for some time had been wanting to establish his own ward, primarily for women with gynaecological problems.

Batchelor had trained at Guy's Hospital in London and gained his MD at Durham. He was appointed to the Dunedin Hospital staff in 1877, but returned to England in 1885 to undertake specialist training in women's diseases at the Chelsea Hospital For Women. In 1886 he was appointed lecturer in midwifery and gynaecology at the Otago Medical School.

Batchelor was skilled at rousing public opinion and had generated sufficient enthusiasm among the women of Dunedin's prominent families for them to create a subscription fund to build his ward. The trustees would not agree to the scheme, however, since creating a new ward would mean continuing expenditure. Batchelor declared the hospital unsafe, removed all his patients and released his letter to the trustees to the public. In the ensuing uproar, the trustees refused to meet Batchelor, called for a public enquiry, and both sides engaged legal counsel.

After hearing witnesses the commission, while careful to avoid blaming the trustees directly, was generally condemnatory of the hospital. The hospital was defective because of its site, plan, ventilation, lighting, heating, overcrowding, kitchen, arrangement of toilet facilities and overall insanitary state. The commission was satisfied that the hospital conditions had contributed to the death of one of Batchelor's women patients. It recommended a new hospital and urgent reforms to

the existing one. 'Miasmatic' theories of infection had held sway for centuries but microbes and antiseptics were just becoming known at this stage. Dunedin Hospital was built on the site of a flax swamp, the building was surrounded by drains, often choked, improperly made and requiring periodic cleaning. The commissioners decried the stagnant tidal pools on the nearby foreshore which brimmed with sewage and the hospitals 'dejecta'. In every building floors, walls and ceilings absorbed atmospheric moisture and were saturated with 'pus globules'. It was a dark, ill-ventilated place, stinking with hospital smell and the stench of putrid bedsores and urine. But at last, thanks to Batchelor and his colleagues reform was on the way.

Batchelor died on 1 September 1915 aged 66 years and is buried in Dunedin's Andersons Bay Cemetery. The burial record states he was born in Norfolk Island.

Research taken from "Dirt, Filth and Decay in a New World Arcadia" by Pamela Wood.