



# Great Queensland Women From Our Past

## Sister Elizabeth Kenny (1880 - 1952)

### Audio transcript

Queensland nurses also contributed a great deal in two World Wars. This is Sister Elizabeth Kenny, she was a nurse in World War I. She invented something called the Sylvia Stretcher, which gave her money from the patent rights for the Sylvia Stretcher, to really be financially independent. You have to realise that this is tough times when she does her training.

She trains on a voluntary basis with a Dr Aeneas McDonnell in Toowoomba. He supports her very much, and she has a little brother who develops polio, and you have to realise that in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, polio is the great killer, sweeping the world, and these children are semi-paralysed.

Now there are two methods of teaching it, the medical modules is that the children are put in an iron lung, and their limbs are splinted, and they're not allowed to use them, whereas Sister Kenny's method is to put hot compresses on the afflicted limb or put them into hot baths, or give massage, the kind of methods that physiotherapists use today. But of course, she's a bush nurse, she's not trained. She sets up these Kenny Clinics, one in Townsville, and one at the Royal Brisbane Hospital, but she's quite outspoken, and she gets into conflict with the doctors, and they say their method is right, she says hers is. Both sides get cures - she has cured her brother remember. Well 'cured', nobody is *cured* from polio - their symptoms are alleviated, but you know, the doctors can't cure them either.

There's this great battle of wills going on, and the doctors submit the Kenny method to a Royal Commission. Now the Royal Commission looks into her, but it does not completely exonerate her. It says that there are good things about the Kenny method, but she's not given the complete okay. She's very upset about this.

The University of Minnesota writes to her - she's not acknowledged by Australian universities, you have to remember - they write to her and say "We'll build a Kenny Clinic for you, you will have an honorary position in the university, you will be teaching medical students and nurses." She feels that this is the necessary academic vindication that she needs, and so she goes to Minnesota, and it is there that she becomes highly influential in American medicine. She actually becomes the sort of grand old woman of America. In a poll, she is voted the second most popular woman in America, the most popular woman being Eleanor Roosevelt, so you know, honour indeed! She doesn't have to use a passport, she's so greatly honoured.

She has a chain of Kenny Clinics all over America using her methods, because the methods otherwise are woeful. People send children to school with camphor in their socks, or put clothes pegs on their noses, which isn't going to help them at all!

And then in her 70s, she gets motor neurone disease, and she decides she wants to come back to Toowoomba. She comes back here really to die - she wants to die in her own home ground and see the jacarandas bloom again she says. A very remarkable woman, who grows up in a family without much money, really educates herself, and becomes world famous.