



**Siedeberg, Emily Hancock** 1873 - 1968  
Doctor, anaesthetist, hospital superintendent

Emily Hancock Siedeberg was born on 17 February 1873 at Clyde, New Zealand. She was the third child of Irish Quaker Anna Thompson and her German architect husband, Franz David Siedeberg, who, lured by gold, had emigrated to New Zealand in 1861 and taken up mining. When Emily was three the family settled in Dunedin, her father becoming a successful building contractor. Emily was educated at the Normal School and at Otago Girls' High School, where she held a board scholarship. From an early age she accepted her father's dictum that she should train as a doctor.

At the end of 1890 they tackled together the formalities which would enable her to enrol at the University of Otago Medical School. Although few authorities were enthusiastic, and some were noisily hostile, opposition on the whole was muted. The university council had already decided that medical training should be open to both women and men. The dean, Dr John Scott, was reluctant but prepared to pledge support, and the hospital medical staff, although more obdurate, in the end yielded grudgingly to the university's decision. In April 1891 Emily Siedeberg became a medical student.

In later life Siedeberg made light of the antagonism she faced in these years, saying that her colleagues were 'quite well-behaved young men' and that, although there was 'one trifling occasion when a few pieces from another dissecting table came in my direction', she had no unpleasant memories. The strictures of both the dean and her mother, however, brought a considerable degree of isolation and constraint; she was warned to give no encouragement to frivolity, to keep men at a distance and never to show her feelings. She was weighed down, too, with a sense of responsibility for the entire future of women in medicine; she felt that the eyes of the world were on her and that her conduct had to be above reproach. It was with some relief that she welcomed as a fellow student her friend Margaret Cruickshank, who joined her in her second year.

In 1896 Siedeberg became New Zealand's first woman medical graduate. She worked as a locum for one month at Seacliff Lunatic Asylum (thus becoming the first New Zealand woman practitioner in the country), before undertaking postgraduate studies in obstetrics, gynaecology and children's diseases in Dublin and Berlin. Later, she completed a BSc and in 1912 did further postgraduate work in Edinburgh. In February 1898, her way eased by substantial financial help from her father, she registered as a medical practitioner and set up a private practice in Dunedin, which she maintained for the next 30 years.

Emily Siedeberg does not appear to have questioned prevailing beliefs that women doctors should confine themselves to certain types of work. Women and children were regarded as most appropriate for utilising the feminine virtues of tender sympathy, delicacy and intuition, and from the first, Siedeberg's patients were mainly from these groups. Her role as guardian of women's health was augmented by honorary appointments. She was medical officer at the Caversham Industrial School (later the Girls' Receiving-home) from 1907 to 1930 and anaesthetist at the Dental School from 1921 to 1931. Most important was her appointment in 1905 as first medical officer (later superintendent) of St Helens Hospital, Dunedin, a position she retained until the hospital's closure in 1938. With her lifelong friend, matron Alice Holford, she struggled against the sometimes bitter opposition of her medical colleagues to the hospital's work, and established its reputation for successful midwifery. Among her achievements was the opening of New Zealand's first antenatal clinic in 1918. Siedeberg also played an active role in the training of midwives and worked closely with the Plunket Society.

Siedeberg's medical career was the core of a life dedicated to welfare and community work. A foundation member of the Dunedin branch of the New Zealand Society for the Protection of Women and Children in 1899, she was president of the Dunedin branch from 1933 to 1948 and became honorary life president in 1949. She was also a foundation member of the Otago

University Women's Association, the New Zealand Federation of University Women and the Townswomen's Guild, and a delegate to the first Pan-Pacific Women's Conference. She was instrumental in establishing the Dunedin branch of the National Council of Women of New Zealand in 1918, and in 1921 was the founder and first president of the New Zealand Medical Women's Association. In the 1930s she was the inspiration behind the work of the Otago Pioneer Women's Memorial Association.

Through these organisations Siedeberg fought 'the wrongs of womankind as she would fight for the life of a patient'. She advocated the raising of the age of consent; strong measures to prevent venereal disease; the abolition of the Contagious Diseases Act 1869; the appointment of women police, hospital and factory inspectors; and equal opportunities for women in higher education and employment. At the same time, she was a staunch eugenicist and believed in capital punishment. She condemned prostitution but offered practical support to 'fallen women' within her own home. On family issues, in keeping with her Victorian principles, she advocated domestic training for all girls to fit them for marriage and motherhood, yet she herself did not marry until late middle age. On 8 October 1928, at Los Angeles, she became the second wife of retired banker James Alexander McKinnon, and was known thereafter as Dr Siedeberg McKinnon. He died in 1949.

Emily Siedeberg was a woman of strength and determination, who rarely gave up once she had set her mind on something. Courageous and dignified, she proved herself a model woman doctor for the period by using her professional skills in the traditional female sphere of community service. Accordingly she was much honoured, being awarded a life membership of the New Zealand Branch of the British Medical Association (1929) and of the New Zealand Registered Nurses' Association (1939), a King George V Silver Jubilee Medal (1935) and a CBE (1949). She died in the Presbyterian Social Service Association home at Oamaru on 13 June 1968, leaving bequests to organisations for the women and children to whom she had dedicated her life.

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