

THE WOMAN WHO CHANGED THE LIVES OF MILLIONS

DOCTOR SISTER MARY GLOWREY (1887-1957)



It is unlikely that many of us have heard of Dr Sister Mary Glowrey, born in the regional Victorian town of Birregurra, but that is going to change.

Mary was one of the leading humanitarians of the 20th century, who, over the course of her lifetime, treated hundreds of thousands of patients and established a healthcare system in India that today cares for more than 30 million people annually.

Inspired by the church's teachings on social justice, she sought to change society not just through prayer, but also with action.

Mary was ahead of her time. Her profound faith, compassion and intellect led her to push the boundaries of the roles that women could play in society. She studied medicine at the University of Melbourne and was the first female resident doctor at Christchurch Hospital. Mary was given special permission from the Pope in 1920 to practise medicine as a religious Sister, making her the world's first Sister-doctor missionary.

But it was her work in global health that is perhaps most inspiring. After reading about the appalling suffering and death rate among women in India, Mary responded by becoming a medical missionary with the congregation of the Society of Jesus Mary Joseph to work in Guntur, in India's rural southeast. She would stay working in India until her death in 1957.

A humanitarian and a systems thinker, Mary devoted her life to improving healthcare in India, where she expanded a small mission into a full hospital, established efficient health systems and pioneered institutions to educate Indian doctors, nurses, midwives and pharmacists. Her success came from her understanding of the need to work within the system to create solutions that were appropriate to the local context.

Perhaps her most enduring and impacting legacy, in 1943 Mary established the Catholic Hospital Association of India (CHAI) to promote the health of the marginalised across India. The work that she began has now blossomed into one of the world's largest health networks comprising 3250 institutions. There are now over one thousand sister-doctors across CHAI following in Mary's footsteps. CHAI delivers healthcare to the poor, irrespective of their creed, to all parts of India.

Throughout her life Mary was said to radiate Christ by word and example. The first Catholic consecrated woman to practise as a doctor, she is being considered for sainthood, and is only the second Australian-born person to reach the status of Servant of God in recognition of her outstanding goodness and virtue. With a shared connection to Doctor Sister Mary Glowrey, the partnership between the University of Melbourne and CHAI is a fitting way to honour her extraordinary legacy.