

Our history

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The Plunket Society was founded over 100 years ago ...
Frederic Truby King. His vision was to help the mothers and save the babies that were dying from malnutrition and disease.



Truby King believed scientifically formulated doctrines on nutrition and infant care were the key to reducing the escalating death rate among babies and children and to the future health of the nation.

His care and devotion to improving the life expectancy of infants was evident even before Plunket's foundation. In fact the first baby taken into Truby King's care was a young Maori baby boy, Tomas Mutu Ellison from Puketeraki Hill in 1906 when upon visiting the family on his way home Truby King suggested he take the young sick infant with him to 'build him up a bit'.

An idealistic man of fierce determination, he Truby King called a public meeting and succeeded in winning the support of influential Dunedin women. They pledged to form a society to carry forward the vision for a new health regime based on the support and education of mothers.

Eight months later, the Karitane Home for Babies opened in Dunedin. It took babies and children under two years who were not treated under the general hospital system. Plunket Karitane Hospitals were the first of their kind and soon spread rapidly around the country. They were known as a safe and caring environment for new and expectant mothers and their babies who were failing to thrive. Dunedin's Karitane Hospital also operated as the sole training centre for Plunket nurses.

By May 1908, a branch of the new society had been formed in each of the four main centres. The work succeeded in attracting the patronage of the influential Victoria Plunket - wife of then Governor-General and mother of eight. The society took the name 'Plunket', after Lady Plunket.

Truby King would have accomplished little without the enthusiastic committed support of volunteers throughout the country. They set up the branches and sub-branches and fundraised for everything, from Plunket nurse salaries and expenses to building clinics and Karitane hospitals.

Plunket's philosophy became parenting lore. Dr King's first mothercraft manual, Feeding and Care of Baby written in 1913, was in popular demand and was translated into Polish, Russian and Spanish. In 1916 he wrote The Expectant Mother and Baby's First Months and these were given to every applicant for a marriage licence.

Sir Truby King received a knighthood for his outstanding contribution to society in 1925. He passed away in 1938, aged 79, and was the first private citizen to be given a state funeral.

Sir Truby King's legacy lives on in the Plunket society, although many of his original teachings do not. The strict regime of care and directive advice from the Plunket nurse has been replaced by a flexible partnership model of care and support for parents and their children.

Funding difficulties prompted the closure of Karitane hospitals in the late 1970's, which were replaced by Plunket Karitane family centres. As the century progressed Plunket continued to forge new innovative programmes in response to the needs of young families. These included the establishment of the national car seat rental scheme programme, piloted in 1981 in Dunedin with just four car seats. Today over 27,000 restraints are available throughout the country. In 1994 Plunket broke new ground

in New Zealand by launching PlunketLine, a telephone advice service staffed with Plunket nurses.

The changing face of NZ in the 1990s meant Plunket was starting to see more Maori parents and families." A training programme for Kaiāwhina (Māori Health Workers) was set up, and positions established for Māori at management and board levels within Plunket's structure.

The Society's volunteer networks and Well Child care and support services continue to play a vital role in the lives of young families. Today, parents of more than 90 percent of new babies access some aspect of Plunket's Well Child health service.

More recently an increasing number of Pacific Island families started enrolling with Plunket . Pacific people consist of a diverse range of identities, languages, cultures, and perspectives that are constantly changing. Samoan, Cook Islands Maori, Tongan, Niuean, Fijian, Tokelau and Tuvalu people make up the majority of the Pacific community within New Zealand.

For the past 100 years Plunket has been a very innovative leader in the provision of Well Child care for children, families and communities, and will continue to be so in the future. Plunket also plays a key role in advocating for children's rights.

We reach our families in a variety of ways, such as face to face through home visits, clinics, our mobile clinic, Parenting Education courses and Car Seat Rental Schemes. We are also available via phone through PlunketLine 24 hours a day, seven days a week on 0800 933 922.

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