

No standing back

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'Australian scientists are wimps. They spend all their time working away in the background, investigating some topic that nobody else in the world understands. They might make a contribution to our knowledge of the world, but they don't really **make** things happen, do they?'

Perhaps we should start a list of common myths about Australian science - the paragraph above could go right at the top, followed by: 'Australian scientists are all more than five foot tall, and of course they never, ever wear funny hats'. [Jean Macnamara](#), who was rather short and certainly did have a collection of odd-looking hats, was one Australian scientist who was determined to be of use to society and to make things happen, even though this sometimes brought her into conflict with her scientific colleagues.

Jean Macnamara graduated in medicine from the University of Melbourne in the 1920s. Shortly afterwards she was appointed to the Children's Hospital, even though the hospital authorities had at first been reluctant to employ her on the grounds that it had no toilet facilities for women doctors! In those days, polio was still a much feared disease, causing paralysis and sometimes death in children. Those who survived might well be crippled for life. With no effective treatments, doctors could do little to help. Jean Macnamara could not bear to stand by watching her patients suffer, so she decided to dedicate her life to the research and treatment of polio.

When a polio epidemic struck Melbourne in 1925, Macnamara decided to test the effectiveness of a serum extracted from the blood of former polio sufferers. Although she was much encouraged by the results of her trials, later tests indicated that she was probably over-optimistic. However, this work led her into an important collaboration with [Macfarlane Burnet](#), one of Australia's greatest medical researchers. Together they discovered that there was more than one strain of the polio virus. This was a vital step towards the development of an effective vaccine.

Macnamara continued her studies of polio in the United States and Europe, visiting a wide range of clinics and research institutions. She became particularly interested in physical methods of treatment, developing them for use in her own practice. Splints and various other strange looking contraptions were used to immobilise limbs and protect muscles from damage. Years of corrective therapy followed with the patient's whole family encouraged to play a part. Macnamara continued her work with polio sufferers for the rest of her life, forming close relationships with many of the families.

But it was not just children's health that concerned Jean Macnamara, it was also their 'inheritance' - the land. While overseas in the 1930s, she was told about a virus, deadly to rabbits, that might be just what Australia needed to fight the rabbit plagues that were devastating the land. Macnamara told the Australian authorities about the myxoma virus, and encouraged them to begin research on its effects. This was done, with field trials being carried out in Australia in the 1930s and '40s.

Unfortunately the trials were disappointing, and by the late 1940s it seemed perhaps time to give up on myxomatosis. But Jean Macnamara was determined that this would not happen. She mounted a public campaign to force CSIRO to continue the research, and gained the support of many

farmers and politicians. As we all know, the trials continued and in 1951 mosquitoes provided the missing factor, spreading the disease rapidly through Australia's rabbit population.

When there was an important job to be done, Jean Macnamara could not stand back and let it go undone. She was not always right, and she made many enemies, but to her science was not just about knowledge, it was about making things happen for the good of society.

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