

Alison Vickery and the typing of staphylococci in Australia



By Richard Benn

Alison Vickery, who died in December 2016, played an important role in the bacteriophage typing of *Staphylococcus aureus* in this country. The technique was introduced by Phyllis Rountree in the 1950s at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, where it was initially used to identify a particularly virulent strain of *S. aureus* (phage type 80/81) in the neonatal nursery.

The work continued in the 1960s when Phyllis Rountree and Molly Baird (nee Pegler) studied the epidemiology of staphylococcal infections in the hospital's surgical units. Much of what is known about the hospital transmission of staphylococcal infection stems from this era. It revealed that most surgical wound infections are caused by the patient's (rather than the attendants') strain of *S. aureus* and it noted the importance of staff, particularly those with chronic skin disease, in the spread of *S. aureus* within the ward.

Alison took over the role of phage typing in the 1970s just as new strains of methicillin-resistant *S. aureus* (MRSA) began appearing in hospitals along the east coast of Australia. She continued to propagate the International Phage Set for use in Australia, liaised with other workers in the field around the world, introduced experimental phages, and studied lysogeny and its consequences in *S. aureus*. For many years she provided a typing service for most of the hospitals of Australia, including the typing of strains isolated in a major AGAR survey¹.

By the 1990s, tracking the movement of MRSA became a major task of our hospital's Infection Control Unit. It was much assisted by phage typing and confirmed the major role of intensive care units in the spread of infection². Newer typing methods have now replaced phage typing in the study of staphylococcal infection but I believe that most of what we know about the epidemiology of the disease was determined by the continued efforts of Alison and her colleagues during the latter part of the 20th century.

References

1. Vickery, A.M. *et al.* (1992) Phage typing of clinically significant methicillin resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* in Australia. AGAR data.
2. Barakate, M.S. *et al.* (2000) An epidemiological survey of methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* in a tertiary referral hospital. *J. Hosp. Infect.* **44**, 19–26. doi:10.1053/jhin.1999.0635

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