

# GWENETH WISEWOULD

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**Class grouping:**

Whole class and pairs (if desired)

**Time:**

20 minutes

**Purpose:**

The purpose of this activity is to introduce students to the achievements of Gweneth Wisewould, a doctor who worked in Melbourne and regional Victoria. Gweneth's attitude to work and life was in stark contrast to the expectations of the time. While she met some resistance to this throughout her life, she overcame adversity and lived a caring and fulfilling life in the town of Trentham.

The activity in this resource works well if you are able to read the attached excerpt before commencing your lesson. This enables the identification of difficult vocabulary words which may require further elaboration. Younger students may also need to be supported as they fill out the questions at the end of the task.

**Activities:**

1. Whole class activity: Read attached excerpt on Dr Gweneth Wisewould's life and achievements.
2. Whole class activity (individually or in pairs): Complete reflection questions and complete creative task on breaking gender norms.
3. Creative task (optional)

**Preparation and Materials:**

- Print copies of reading materials and prepare questions on whiteboard (or print out if desired).
- Read 'Gweneth Wisewould' excerpt prior to class to familiarise yourself with the text.

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## Activity 1: Gweneth Wisewould excerpt

**Whole class activity:** Read the following document as a class then answer and discuss questions.

*It was often said this remarkable woman was born well ahead of her time, studying to become a doctor when the professional world was dominated by men.*

Born in Melbourne in 1884, adored daughter of prosperous parents, Gweneth graduated as a doctor in 1915 and worked as a surgeon in several of Melbourne's top hospitals. Gweneth graduated from the University of Melbourne (M.B., B.S., 1915). She was a resident at the Melbourne (1915-16) and Alfred (1916) hospitals, and senior resident (1917) at the Queen's Memorial Infectious Diseases Hospital, before engaging in private practice at St Kilda and Elsternwick and in prestigious Collins Street. Holding a number of honorary posts, she performed ear, nose and throat work and general surgery (1918-36) at the Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital for Women and Children (Melbourne); she also instructed medical students in anaesthetics (1918-29) at the Alfred Hospital.

Unconventional and artistic, Gweneth mixed in Melbourne's bohemian circles and lived with her lifelong friend and companion Ella Bell. She turned heads while riding her motorcycle – a female doctor on a motorcycle being a rare sight in Melbourne at the time.

Gweneth soon fell foul of the medical establishment, who did not approve of her lifestyle or associates. Forced to resign from the Queen Victoria Hospital following unfounded allegations, she decided to make a fresh start in the country. In 1938, she and Ella Bell moved to Trentham, where Gweneth became the town doctor, working both in general practice and at Trentham Bush Nursing Hospital. Locals were at first wary of this newcomer, but her dedication, generosity and excellent medical skills soon endeared her to even the most conservative members of the community.

Gweneth served tirelessly as Trentham's doctor for the next 34 years. Many of her patients were struggling farmers or townsfolk and Gweneth rarely billed for her services. Conditions in the small settlements of the region, and on the roads over the hilly terrain between them, demanded physical courage and resourcefulness. Gweneth worked long hours, driving the muddy country roads in order to treat patients and deliver babies.

Always the pragmatist, Gweneth wore men's clothing, boots and a heavy overcoat, explaining that 'you cannot do this work looking pretty'. That shocked some of the people in Trentham. Fortunately for Gweneth, there was a baby boom occurring and in the first few weeks of her arrival she delivered umpteen babies and established herself as a competent physician.

Gweneth's considerable surgical skills enabled her to deal with emergencies, whether she was obliged to operate in isolated cottages or in Trentham's tiny

hospital she called her 'home away from home'. Sturdily built, she worked long hours and travelled tirelessly. She drove a big old Dodge pick-up truck. She carried a house door in the back of it that she used as a stretcher. On unmade mud roads she travelled around the district looking after the sick. She also had rooms down at Blackwood, about 8 km down a rugged road. Gweneth would work until she was exhausted and people would see her parked on the side of the road, sound asleep.

Personally frugal but generous to others, Gweneth donated \$20,000 to the University of Melbourne in 1968 to provide 'Truganini Scholarships' for Aboriginal students. Her wit was well known and her annual Christmas poem was famous for featuring local identities and stories. The town of Trentham embraced Gweneth as a doctor and a person, presenting her with an engraved silver brooch in 1963, to mark 25 years' dedicated service to the community.

Gweneth worked right up until the day of her death, on the 20th of January 1972. Trentham mourned the loss of their beloved 'Dr Gwen' and the whole town shut up shop and turned out for her funeral. A memorial clock now graces the main street of Trentham, with the dedication, 'Erected by a Grateful Public'. Gweneth Wisewould is remembered today as 'simply a wonderful person'.

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## Activity 2: Questions

1. Name the Melbourne hospitals where Gweneth worked.
2. Why do you think the medical establishment took such a dislike to Gweneth? Explain, using at least two examples from the text.
3. What is a 'bohemian' lifestyle? You might need to use your dictionary to look this up. Explain how Gweneth could be considered bohemian.
4. Why were the people of Trentham shocked by Gweneth's appearance? How did she overcome this potential prejudice?
5. Explain, with reference to the text and Gweneth's time in Trentham, why she is considered to be a 'wonderful person'.

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## Activity 3: Creative task

1. Imagine you are a resident living in Trentham in 1938. Remember, this was a time when gender roles were very conservative. Write a letter to a friend describing the new doctor, Gweneth Wisewould, who lived in the town.

Resource altered for student use and developed from excerpts from the following publications:

- Wisewould, Gweneth (1884-1972) by Farley Kelly *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 16, (MUP), 2002  
Online version: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/wisewould-gweneth-12058>
- Heather Mutimer Women's Honour Roll: Dr Gweneth Wisewould (posthumous)  
<http://www.hepburn.vic.gov.au/womens-honour-roll/>
- Ian Braybrook TRANSCRIPT (see video in link) <http://www.cv.vic.gov.au/stories/a-diverse-state/daylesford-stories/dr-gweneth-wisewould/>



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