1. Early Years

> Independent thought and action and outspoken criticism were marked characteristics. With this independent spirit went a tenacity of purpose which made him formidable to those who did not see eye to eye with him. But his sincerity was never in question, and if at times conviction was with him the better part of argument, he convinced by the pure force of his personality where argument would have failed. Not that he was unreasonable, but he wanted things done, and he wanted them done quickly. Anything like an abuse or misuse of authority roused his fighting spirit, and having espoused a cause, he threw himself whole-heartedly into it. What is more, he got things done; he was a great driving force, with method and a full sense of detail … He had great humanity; the pain and suffering of others touched him and moved him to action.[1]

This was John William Springthorpe, as described by his long-time friend and medical colleague Felix Meyer. Springy, as he was known, was a cultured, well-educated Victorian gentleman. Events in his life gave him many opportunities to make use of his talents and to show his fighting spirit. But his personality did not always fit well with other people's. Meyer's description was a loyal friend's way of saying that Springy was opinionated, bossy, argumentative and stubborn – but remarkably intelligent and, annoyingly, often correct.

Springthorpe was born on 29 August 1855 at Wolverhampton in Staffordshire, England, the second son of John Springthorpe (1829–1906), a mercer from Matlock in Derbyshire, and his wife, Hannah Maria Newell from Hebden Bridge in Yorkshire (1835–1906). In all, there would be thirteen children, of whom ten would live beyond the childhood years.[2] In 1860, when Springy was four, the family (which at that time had just three children) emigrated to Australia, arriving in

Sydney on the *Anglesey* in July of that year. They spent a year and a half in Melbourne before returning to Sydney, where they lived in Balmain, then a working-class area.

Young John was educated first at Fort Street Model School. This was only eleven or twelve years after the school had been established by the government, on the site of the former military hospital on Sydney's Observatory Hill, as an exemplar of how the colonial authorities wanted future schools to be run. Springy later recalled singing 'God Save the Queen' at Government House, with other children from Fort Street, to celebrate the arrival of Prince Alfred in 1868.[3] He remained there for ten years. (The school taught at both primary and secondary levels until 1911.) During this time, his siblings Florence, Amy, Albert, Edith and Charles were born.

Springy was dux of his final year at Fort Street. He then moved to Sydney Grammar School on a scholarship.[4] All three of the older sons studied at Sydney Grammar: Arthur for one year in 1868, John for three years (1869–71) and Frederick for two (1870–71).[5] The family then came back to Melbourne, where, from 1872, John completed his secondary education at Wesley College, which had been founded just six years earlier. The Springthorpe family were devout Methodists, and Wesley was doubtless chosen for this reason. Springy regularly attended church. Helping others, particularly the poor, was central to his vision of personal worth and to building the church and its missionary spirit. He shared this faith with another of his good friends at school, Edgar Inglis, whose friendship would soon prove life-changing.

At Wesley, Springy also met Felix Meyer. Meyer recalled his classmate as 'a brainy and brilliant boy, alive at every point, full of fun, impulsive, fearless, generous. Learning came easy to him.'[6] Springy was the second student to be awarded the Walter Powell Scholarship, endowed by the widow of one of the founders of Wesley College and presented to the most capable student each year, on condition that he proceed to university.

In 1874, Springy entered the University of Melbourne, studying both arts and medicine. This involved attending a double set of lectures, but he continued to excel. Despite this heavy workload, he was an active sportsman, playing football and 'fives' (a handball game played by two or four players in an enclosed court). He also enthusiastically took part in 'Hare and Hounds' (a form of cross-country footrace).[7]

He was living with his family in St Kilda at this stage, when, in the space of two months, two of his little brothers died: Frank in November 1875 at the age of five years, and Edward in January 1876 at three years. This doubtless had a destabilising effect on the family, for in 1877, when Springy was aged twenty-two and only halfway through his medical studies, his parents and younger siblings returned to England. Sadly, the family's travails did not end there: only a few months after returning to England, his sixteen-year-old sister, Amy, also died. Springy and two of his brothers, Arthur and Frederick, were left in Melbourne to be responsible for their own futures.

At this time, the Inglis family (who had grown wealthy by managing shipping and overland freight routes between Melbourne, Ballarat and Gippsland) and their circle of friends provided Springy with much-needed stability and enrichment, especially in social and cultural areas.[8] Springy often visited the family at their city house in Kew and their country property in Gippsland. He became particularly attracted to Edgar's younger sister, Annie, who was then a student at Presbyterian Ladies' College.

Annie Inglis was the sixth of nine children, and the fourth daughter (although two of her younger sisters had died in early childhood). Her father had emigrated from Fife in Scotland in around 1850 and had married a local girl, Maria Hale, in 1853. The Inglis family were cousins of the well-connected à Beckett family. Emma Minnie à Beckett was attending the National Gallery School, along with Arthur Merric Boyd (her future husband) and other future luminaries of Melbourne's art scene: Emanuel Phillips Fox, Rupert Bunny, Frederick McCubbin, Gia Follingsby, Tom Roberts, Charles Richardson and Bertram Mackennal.[9]

Springy graduated with his Bachelor of Arts in 1877, achieving first-class honours and the exhibitions in mathematics and classics, which recognised his position as top-ranking student in both classes. He then graduated with a Master of Arts in 1878, and with a Bachelor of Medicine and Surgery in 1879, again receiving first-class honours.[10] While at university, he developed his confrontational personal style with both peers and authorities. Felix Meyer described an incident where Springy acted as judge in the trial of a law student who had lampooned medical students in newspapers; Springy convicted him and sentenced him to 'involuntary immersion' (walking through

the lake in front of the Student Union building). The punishment was accepted by the victim without loss of friendship.[11] Meyer also described his challenging of lecturers and heavy involvement in student politics.

One incident had serious consequences. Just after taking his third-year examinations, Springy admitted to having borrowed an important book from the library without registering it, and having passed it on to another student after using it. He was disciplined by the professorial board with the cancellation of his examination result. His appeal against the severity of the punishment revealed a conflict of authority between the university council and the professorial board, which regarded itself as responsible for student discipline. The university council ordered a reinstatement of his passing exam result.[12]

Springy was the leader of a committee appointed by the Medical Students' Society to report on the best means to secure a fairer representation in the university senate. The committee complained that the university had, by altering the requirements for senior degrees and making a new means of entry into the senate, granted facilities that favoured all existing university schools except the Medical School. The medical students contended that, as a matter of right and to place their school upon the same footing as the others, the university council should change the rules. Several mechanisms were offered for consideration, the one most favoured being creation of the degree of Master of Medicine, analogous to the existing degree of Master of Laws, which would carry that privilege.[13] This was not agreed to at the time, but was enacted some years later.

Following graduation, Springy worked for a year at Beechworth Asylum in north-east Victoria, commencing in March 1880, as acting superintendent during the absence of Dr Watkins.[14] He then left for England to undertake specialist training. He worked at a cluster of hospitals, later subsumed into the famous National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery in Queen Square. This was the leading institution in neurology, where Springy undertook extramural studies, and on 27 October 1881, he became the first Australian medical graduate to be admitted to membership of the Royal College of Physicians.[15]

Springy returned from London to Australia as a ship's surgeon on the *Star of India*, arriving in Sydney on 16 November 1883, and then

sailing on to Melbourne. He obtained posts as pathologist to the Alfred Hospital and assistant outpatient physician to the Melbourne Hospital, and continued his postgraduate education by obtaining the higher degree of Doctor of Medicine at the University of Melbourne in 1884. He established a private practice in Collins Street – then vying with Spring Street as Melbourne's most prestigious address for doctors – and his fortunes improved significantly. He began his important studies of patients with epilepsy, presenting the first of his papers on this subject to the Medical Society of Victoria in 1886.[16]

Figure 1: The young Dr Springthorpe

Around this time, Springy was briefly engaged to a young woman, to whom he referred in his diary only as 'Louie D'. This ended with her threatening to sue him for breach of promise, but it was settled by agreement. He afterwards referred to the relationship as 'a mistake'. He continued his involvement with the Inglis family and courted Annie. When she turned eighteen, he asked her to marry him, but was refused on the grounds that she was too young, and that he was not yet fully established in his career. He must wait.

Generally, Springy mixed with a small group of professionals and businessmen, which included solicitor and politician Theodore Fink, university lecturer and medical politician Dr James Edward Neild, professor of music G.W.L. Marshall-Hall, and scientist and anthropologist Professor Walter Baldwin Spencer. These men cultivated Melbourne's avant-garde artists, who in turn invited their patrons to smoke nights, exhibitions and studios.

Springy was also a long-standing friend of architect Harold Desbrowe-Annear, of sculptor Bertram Mackennal, and of artists Tom Roberts (who painted his portrait in 1886 and Annie's in 1887) and John Longstaff (who painted his portrait in 1895).[17] Topics of conversation included pre-Raphaelite painting and Arthurian literature – in Melbourne, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones and Alfred, Lord Tennyson all had their admirers, none keener than Springthorpe. It was no coincidence that Springy's principal residence was named Camelot, his later residence named Joyous Gard, and his eldest son Lancelot. The Arthurian legend resonated deeply during Victoria's reign; its courtly chivalry was the romantic metaphor of the times.[18]

A number of Springy's friends were members of the Yorick Club in Spring Street, which had begun in 1868 as informal meetings of writers held at the rooms of journalist Frederick Haddon. Among the club's early members were Marcus Clarke and his literary executor Hamilton Mackinnon, Adam Lindsay Gordon, Dr Neild, J. J. Shillinglaw and George Walstab. Members during Springy's time included Henry Kendall, George Gordon McCrae and the physician and author Patrick Moloney.

Although 'composed of gentlemen connected with literary, scientific, and artistic pursuits' the Yorick Club was initially a boisterous organisation, parodying the gentlemen's clubs of establishment

Melbourne.[19] It relocated several times in its early years because of chronic financial difficulties, due in part to membership fluctuations and irregular subscription payments. It was an early expression of the bohemian strand of the 1860s literary world but had, by the late 1880s, become more respectable.[20] Springy is said to have joined the Yorick Club around this time, and later the Melbourne-based Wallaby Club, the oldest walking club in Australia, of which he was a member from 1903 to 1929.[21]

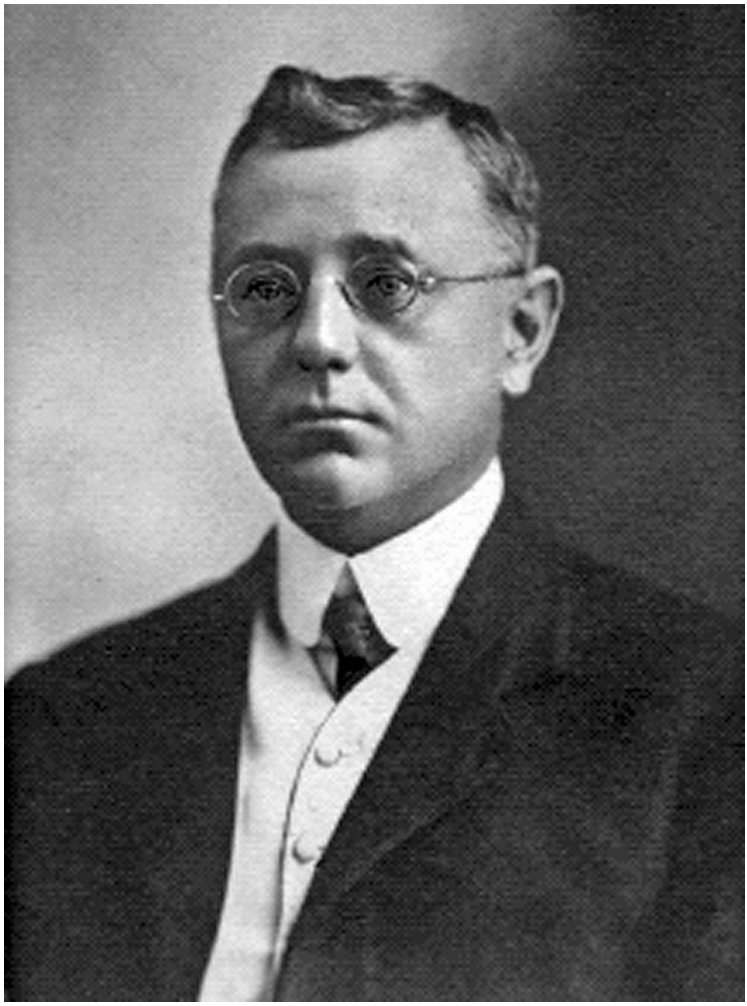
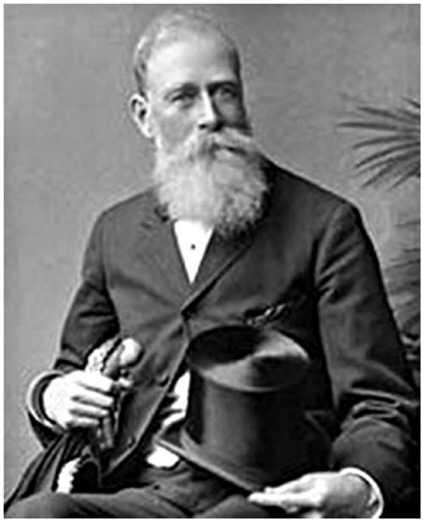


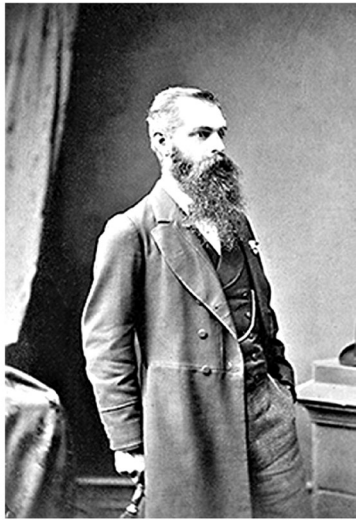
Figure 2: Dr John William Springthorpe

He was also part of an informal group of intellectuals and artists known as 'Bohemia', who used to meet at Fasioli's, a Lonsdale Street café.[22] He joined the St John Ambulance Association Council for Victoria in 1886, just three years after its commencement, at the age of thirty-one, and would remain a member for the next forty-five years, becoming the second-longest-serving member in its history. The chairman at first was the architect Lloyd Tayler, and other members included Dr Neild and Professor Henry Martyn Andrew, one of the founding teaching staff and later headmaster of Wesley College.

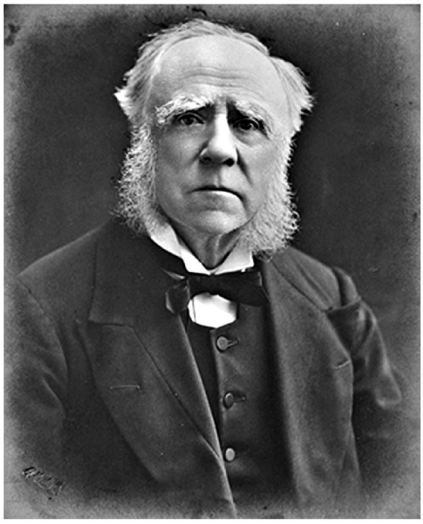
It is likely that Springy was recruited by Neild, one of his university teachers and a fellow member of the Yorick Club.[23] Neild's interest in theatre and literature extended to regular contributions to magazines and newspapers as a theatre critic, and to hosting poetry and play readings at his home. In 1883, Neild had called a public meeting to garner support for the teaching of first aid in Australia. This resulted in the establishment of the Victorian branch of St John Ambulance, the first in the country. One of Melbourne's most important physicians, he was a forensic medicine specialist. He often gave evidence in court cases, and when the coroner was absent, would deputise in that role. He was deeply involved in medical politics, having been president of the Medical Society of Victoria in 1868 and continuing on its committee as editor of the *Australian Medical Journal*.



Lloyd Tayler



Henry Martyn Andrew



James Edward Neild

George Horne

Figure 3: St John Ambulance Council members

In 1879, Neild and several like-minded colleagues formed the Victorian Branch of the British Medical Association. Ostensibly, this was to foster relationships with the profession in the 'mother country', but in actuality, it was a protest against the committee of the Medical Society of Victoria for failing to admit Dr Louis Henry to membership.

Dr Neild regarded this as an act of anti-Semitism, and declined all attempts to dissuade his resignation; the affair created a schism in local medical politics. Until this time, the Medical Society of Victoria was the only representative body for the profession in the colony. Although many doctors belonged to both organisations, some belonged to only one or the other. At the time of the schism, Springy had just graduated and was about to travel overseas; nevertheless, he was a member of both groups, though his preference lay with the British Medical Association, of which he became honorary secretary not long after his return home in November 1883.

In January 1887, the University of Melbourne confirmed Springy's appointment to a lectureship in therapeutics, dietetics and hygiene. As well as paying an annual salary of £250, the appointment was a real feather in his cap. Emboldened, he again proposed marriage to Annie. This time, he was successful. Springy was ecstatic: his dreams were coming true.

Dr John William Springthorpe and Miss Annie Constance Marie Inglis were married on 26 January 1887, which was Annie's 20th birthday. The ceremony took place at 'Eurolie', the Inglis family home at Vaucluse, part of the inner-Melbourne suburb of Richmond, with Wesleyan minister Reverend Dr James Waugh officiating.

Figure 4: Annie Inglis on her wedding day

Annie and her family were Congregationalists, and the couple subsequently attended the Congregationalist Collins Street Independent Church, nowadays called St Michael's. Their honeymoon trip involved a train journey: to Geelong, then to Camperdown, and on to Portland and Warrnambool on Victoria's south-west coast.

Figure 5: At Warrnambool on honeymoon

On their return to Melbourne on 18 February, the couple lived first in an old house at 168 Collins Street.

Figure 6: 'Our first home'

A few months later, they moved to a new house (which they named 'Camelot') at 83 Collins Street, where Springy also set up his professional rooms. The Springthorpes' first child, Dorothy Anne, was born on 6 December 1887, but died after only twenty-two days.[24] She was buried at Boroondara Cemetery in Kew.

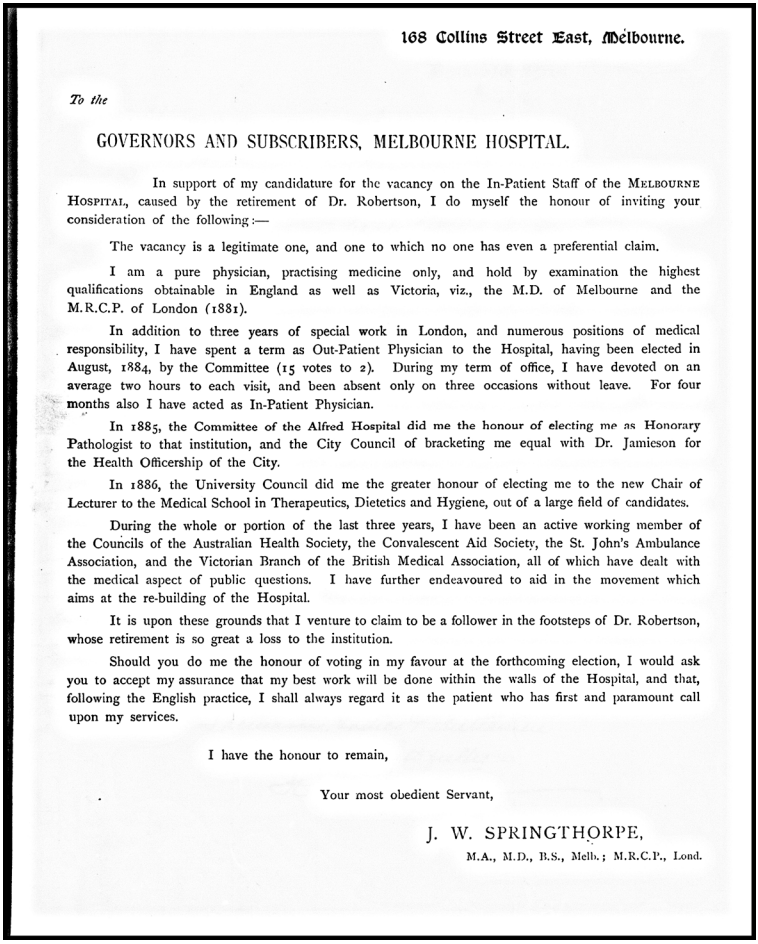
Collecting art was an early venture of the Springthorpes'. Springy had already commissioned Tom Roberts to paint his portrait in 1886, and he commissioned one of Annie in 1887; refer to Figure 7 on page 92. (In 1891, Roberts would also paint Annie holding Enid, their second child, as a baby.[25] Springy financially supported Bertram Mackennal's travel to England, and in 1895 would commission another portrait of himself by John Longstaff.) He was secure in his hospital appointments and his private practice was thriving.

The four-yearly elections of the Melbourne Hospital's honorary medical staff were to take place in mid-1887. Springy nominated for a post as inpatient physician to replace Dr Robert Robertson, who was retiring – Springy would much prefer to be head of unit than helper. If successful, this would greatly increase his standing in the profession, and his financial prospects.

At the time, the hospital still clung to the charity hospital custom of honorary medical staff being elected by a panel of philanthropic donors. There was an unwritten law that each member of the old guard would be regularly re-elected until he chose to retire, at which time the

next in line would step up to become head of unit. But Springy took the view that it should be an election of the best person for the job, and he wished to show that he was the right person. To this end, he sent a circular letter to all the Melbourne Hospital electors, in which he listed his academic and professional credentials.

There was an immediate and hostile reaction. Springy was accused of unethical behaviour by advertising.



168 Collins Street East, Melbourne.

To the

GOVERNORS AND SUBSCRIBERS, MELBOURNE HOSPITAL.

In support of my candidature for the vacancy on the In-Patient Staff of the MELBOURNE HOSPITAL, caused by the retirement of Dr. Robertson, I do myself the honour of inviting your consideration of the following:—

The vacancy is a legitimate one, and one to which no one has even a preferential claim.

I am a pure physician, practising medicine only, and hold by examination the highest qualifications obtainable in England as well as Victoria, viz., the M.D. of Melbourne and the M.R.C.P. of London (1881).

In addition to three years of special work in London, and numerous positions of medical responsibility, I have spent a term as Out-Patient Physician to the Hospital, having been elected in August, 1884, by the Committee (15 votes to 2). During my term of office, I have devoted on an average two hours to each visit, and been absent only on three occasions without leave. For four months also I have acted as In-Patient Physician.

In 1885, the Committee of the Alfred Hospital did me the honour of electing me as Honorary Pathologist to that institution, and the City Council of bracketing me equal with Dr. Jamieson for the Health Officership of the City.

In 1886, the University Council did me the greater honour of electing me to the new Chair of Lecturer to the Medical School in Therapeutics, Dietetics and Hygiene, out of a large field of candidates.

During the whole or portion of the last three years, I have been an active working member of the Councils of the Australian Health Society, the Convalescent Aid Society, the St. John's Ambulance Association, and the Victorian Branch of the British Medical Association, all of which have dealt with the medical aspect of public questions. I have further endeavoured to aid in the movement which aims at the re-building of the Hospital.

It is upon these grounds that I venture to claim to be a follower in the footsteps of Dr. Robertson, whose retirement is so great a loss to the institution.

Should you do me the honour of voting in my favour at the forthcoming election, I would ask you to accept my assurance that my best work will be done within the walls of the Hospital, and that, following the English practice, I shall always regard it as the patient who has first and paramount call upon my services.

I have the honour to remain,

Your most obedient Servant,

J. W. SPRINGTHORPE,

M.A., M.D., B.S., Melb.; M.R.C.P., Lond.

Figure 8: Circular letter

He was asked to appear before a special meeting of the Medical Society of Victoria. Before he could answer his critics, however, the MSV committee sent a copy of the circular to the Royal College of

Physicians in London, on the grounds that it involved an extraordinary breach of professional etiquette. Springy was furious. He fought back, using every opportunity to air his views in the public arena. The press was delighted to take up the issue:

> Dr. Springthorpe regards the action taken as unjust and injurious, and describes it as a jealous attempt to thwart his advancement by asking the opinion of one of the most Conservative bodies in England upon the conduct of one of the most democratic hospital elections in the world. It is, he says, a case of malice run mad.[26]

In a letter to the MSV, which he released to the press, Springy said that it was insulting for the MSV to have taken such action without consulting its broader membership, and that the decision had been made by a small number of the committee men, most of whom had been his rivals in various ways. He complained that the MSV had failed to inform him of the ways in which he had allegedly not followed custom or said anything unworthy or untrue. He demanded the opportunity to put his defence to a general meeting of the MSV, which responded by calling a special general meeting on 10 August, just over a week before the election was due to take place, 'to consider Dr Springthorpe's complaint against the committee'.[27]

In the lead-up to the special meeting, the war of words in the papers continued. Representatives of the committee argued that the MSV routinely censured advertising, and that on this occasion, by referring the matter to an independent arbiter, the Royal College of Physicians, it was distancing itself from any possible complaint of personal prejudice. If the Royal College upheld the allegation of impropriety, the MSV would be vindicated, but if it rejected the allegation, the concerns of the MSV would be viewed as folly. Yet, not to have acted, or to have deferred action, would have been criticised even more than acting.

An avalanche of criticisms of candidates and the committee followed over the next few days, together with numerous letters to the newspapers, as well as considerable satirical comments, cartoons and doggerel. One commentator criticised the University of Melbourne for appointing Springy to a senior lectureship when he was but a junior

in the profession, though hoping that he would 'get on' in due course. This drew a sharp, though anonymous, response in the letters:

> Surely the University knows its own business best, and is well able to look after its own interests. Never in any other University have I heard of senior men for senior posts, and junior men for junior posts. Age does not mean ability. Universities elect lecturers for known ability, and take small account of a man's years. I have no doubt that Dr Springthorpe's successes make many envious, and gain him many detractors. One good trait in the Russell street practitioner is his wish that Dr Springthorpe 'may get on.' Amongst other things, he told your reporter that; but I infer, from the other things that Dr Springthorpe's getting on is somewhat too fast just now to be pleasing. The getting on after the manner of a snail would apparently better please the Russell street doctor. Human nature prompts me to take the side of the weak against the strong; the side of the oppressed against the oppressor; the side of the one against the many. Might, as exemplified by the Medical Society, is not necessarily right. If the majority of hospital subscribers are of my way of thinking, they can show their practical sympathy for Dr Springthorpe on 18th inst. Not being a Melbourne Hospital candidate, publicity therefore not being a necessity for me, I shall adopt a nom de plume. I enclose my card and am—Yours, &c. MEDICO.[28]

At the special meeting, Springy put forward his view that his circular did not significantly differ from the cards of other candidates, and that others had also issued circulars, but had not received the same censure.