

Eileen Rosaline O'Connor profile for National Pioneer Women's Hall of Fame in Alice Springs

Eileen Rosaline O'Connor played an important but little-known role in the history of nursing, welfare and the Catholic Church in Australia. As a young woman, she established a religious order that has performed a unique ministry of healthcare, advocacy and friendship for the sick poor and disadvantaged for more than 100 years.

Born to Irish immigrants in Melbourne on 9 February 1892, Eileen was crippled by a fall that injured her spine when aged three. She was largely paralysed for several years and remained in constant and often excruciating pain throughout her brief life. Her family moved to Sydney when she was 10 years old.

Despite a severe physical disability, little education or theological formation, she established a society of Catholic nurses to serve the sick poor in their own homes when she was only 21 years old. At the time, there was no Government-funded healthcare or welfare; illness or injury could place a terrible burden on those with limited or no income. The foundation nurses – and those who followed – became affectionately known as the 'Brown Nurses' because of their distinctive brown bonnets and cloaks.

Eileen O'Connor died at Our Lady's Home, Coogee, on 10 January 1921, a month short of her 29th birthday. The Society of Our Lady's Nurses for the Poor continued its mission and was recognised as a religious order by the Catholic Church in 1953. At one stage, more than 40 sisters and novices were caring for the sick poor throughout Sydney, Brisbane, Newcastle and Wollongong.

Eileen's legacy continues to this day. The sisters of Our Lady's Nurses for the Poor continue to assist the sick poor in Sydney, Newcastle and Macquarie Fields with the ongoing assistance of our volunteers and benefactors, while the Brown Nurses, an independent ministry of Our Lady's Nurses for the Poor, serves the sick poor and disadvantaged in the City of Sydney.

Eileen O'Connor is considered to be a 'saint in waiting'. Her beautiful spirit inspired many people to seek her guidance and prayers during her short life. In 2018, the Catholic Church began the formal process for her beatification.