

PORIRUA MENTAL HOSPITAL.

Dr. Gray Hassell reports:—

During 1915 the total number of patients under treatment was 1,197, and the average number resident 948. Of the 251 admitted, 196 (119 males and 77 females) were admitted for the first time, a decline of about 11 per cent. in comparison with the previous year. 104 were discharged recovered, which makes a recovery-rate of 41·4 per cent. of the number admitted. 71 died, a ratio of nearly 7·5 per cent. of the average number in residence. The deaths included 12 from general paralysis, 11 from tubercular disease, and 20 who were upwards of seventy years of age. One of these had been forty-two years in Auckland and Porirua Mental Hospitals.

The general health of patients has been good. There has been comparatively little sickness in the wards. Typhoid fever, which in former years seemed so difficult to eradicate, was entirely absent. We have, however, two typhoid-carriers continuously quarantined under as comfortable conditions as circumstances will allow: one of them is a carrier of many years' standing, and until discovered and quarantined was, I think, the chief source of infection.

I regret to have to record an unusual number of fatal accidents. A frail old man who had been over twenty years in the Mental Hospital was asphyxiated at dinner by food blocking the air-passages. Although medical aid was immediately summoned, efforts to save his life were unavailing. Two deaths from suicide occurred, and, as is usual, the tragedies happened not in those cases which are obviously suicidal and are under special and close supervision, but in those which are hardly suspected of being suicidal at all. Both deaths were by hanging. One took place in the daytime in a lavatory adjoining a large day-room in occupation by patients and attendants, and the other in the night, the patient breaking through the window of his dormitory and escaping. Although closely followed by attendants the patient evaded them in the darkness and was subsequently found in some native bush about a quarter of a mile away, but life was extinct. The last fatality to which I have to refer was one which gave me much concern, because it was entirely due to the negligence of an attendant. A demented old man required bathing in the early morning. The attendant in charge of this patient took him to the ward bathroom and, in defiance of the precautions laid down in our bathing rules, allowed the patient to get into a bath of scalding water, and the greater part of one side of the patient was severely scalded. The patient was then dressed, and was up and about all day never complaining. He was too demented to complain, but his condition was discovered in the evening, and he died next day. The attendant concealed what he had done, but before the Coroner's inquest was closed confessed his responsibility. He was summarily dismissed, and ultimately stood his trial at the Supreme Court on a charge of manslaughter. He was, however, acquitted by the jury, who, I understand, took the view that, although there was carelessness or negligence, there was no criminal intention on the part of the attendant. Such a case as this gives one a very unpleasant impression, but I may be allowed to observe that in the course of the year at this Hospital there are fully fifty thousand warm baths given to patients, and many at all hours of the day and night, and that the above is the only accident of the kind which has taken place since the institution was founded.

The activities of our community have been run on the usual lines, the farm, the gardens, &c., being developed and benefited by the industry of patients, who have themselves benefited by healthy and useful occupation. For the women there is less variety of work, and practically none out-of-doors. On this account I have organized for them daily excursions and walking-parties of the milder and curable cases, with beneficial results.

In the first half of the year I fortunately had the assistance of Dr. Gribben, whose ability and experience I appreciated all the more because for some months prior to his coming I was without a resident assistant. Dr. Redpath was on duty for about two months in the autumn, and did good work. He left to join the Army Medical Service, and is now on duty in Mesopotamia. Dr. Hodgson was transferred from Seacliff in May, and is still here; he has maintained the high reputation he brought with him. Dr. Reid joined our staff in September and remained six months, when he was appointed to the Army Medical Service, and is now, I believe, on duty in France. He proved himself a capable and painstaking officer, and I regretted losing his services.

In the staff of attendants and nurses some difficulty was found in maintaining the numbers in adequate strength, especially towards the end of the year. The shortage was particularly noticeable in the female nursing staff, where the reduction at one time was as low as 50 per cent. War conditions governed the situation. Most of our young attendants had joined the Army, and the vacancies were filled as best we could by married men and by single men ineligible for military duty. Why there was so much difficulty in filling vacancies in the female nursing staff was less obvious, but I dare say it was partly due to the prosperous financial condition of the Dominion, and partly to women nowadays replacing men in business offices and other channels of employment, and so depleting the market.

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