



## Queen Mary Hospital at Hanmer Springs

Wellington Public Hospital is a labyrinth of white brilliantly-lit corridors with hundreds of doors opening and shutting as members of the staff make their way from one part of the huge complex to another. “Can you direct me to the Medical School Library?” I said to a passing employee. “I can reach it from the outside, but not from the inside. I’ll get lost in these corridors.” We set off together, and after a few false turns we found the right route. The employee gave me a curious look as we walked along, and said to me. “May I ask why you are going to the Medical School Library?”

I said, “I’m doing some research on Queen Mary Hospital at Hanmer in North Canterbury. It was a psychiatric facility for over half a century. The Hospital began by treating soldiers sent back from the Great War with shell-shock and other nervous disorders. Later the Hospital dealt with alcoholics. Some soldiers graduated from the first condition to the second.”

“My mother was a patient in Queen Mary Hospital,” said my companion. “She was suffering from depression, and they gave her shock treatment there. Puerperal depression, they said it was. My grandfather was an alcoholic when he returned from the Second World War. Maybe he should have gone to Hanmer. The Library is through that door. Good luck with your work.”

In the Library I asked for the small bound volumes that contain all copies of the *New Zealand Medical Journal* for the years 1917, 1918, 1919 and 1920. It did not take long to skim through them. At this distance in time, they tell a story of a medical community, and a small country, that was carrying on under extreme stress.

New Zealand was a colonial society, with a high incidence of mental disorders and heavy drinking, and the Great War shattered thousands of relationships. Between a third and a half of all the seven to eight hundred doctors simply quit their practices in order to serve abroad. The country became a medical desert, with a doctor/patient ratio of 1:2500. The leading medico-political issue was how to make sure that the Army doctors got their patients back when the war was over. Another issue was the recruitment of new graduates, who were needed as much for the hospitals at home as they were for work on the Western Front. Senior doctors were given commissions as Army officers, and this gesture probably neutralised any opinions they might have had on military matters.

I found a good article on the Queen Mary Hospital, in which it was noted that the hotel closest to the hospital was 25 miles away. Other articles were on the management of the incurable disorders tuberculosis and syphilis, and some were by Army surgeons on the treatment of severe injuries.

An informative piece about the sixteenth century military surgeon, Ambroise Paré, tells how he abandoned the use of boiling oil for dealing with the wounds received in battle. A famous reformer, Ettie Rout, described scenes in Cairo during the war, where “outside the more notorious brothels long queues of soldiers waited their turn.”

In a recent book about the Great War of 1914 to 1918, a French writer said, “No-one escaped the war unharmed.”

For whatever reason, the medical records of Queen Mary Hospital have been destroyed.

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