

# The abuse and use of hospitals



PLAYING AT HOSPITALS. "I know I'm ill, doctor, 'cos my foot's asleep, and things are pretty bad when you go to sleep at the wrong end," (*Evening Post*, 20 December 1913).

Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/18263269>

Closely related to this question of payment for work done is the fact that there is a growing tendency among the people of the Dominion to take the advantage of hospital treatment. In 1912-13, 25.8 per 1000 of the population were treated in hospitals; in 1903-4 the proportion was 18.21; the average number of beds occupied varied in the same years from 1.49 to 2.04 of the population. No medical man can fail to see that in most respects, sick people are more advantageously treated in a hospital than in a private house. The observations, on which exact diagnosis is based, are better made by nurses and others, who can report as to variations in pulse, temperature, secretions, etc., in a way often impossible in private homes. Treatment can also be much more effectively given in nearly all cases, and the burden upon a home, a lodging-house, or an hotel of sick nursing is relieved. The conditions of life in a well equipped hospital—the cleanliness, quiet and order are much superior as a rule to anything which even the wealthy can procure.

That under present regulations there is an enormous abuse of the public hospital system is undoubted. Many people constantly throw their burdens on the public who can pay quite easily wholly or in part for the help they need. But we have this difficulty to face, that while the people at large are yearly gaining more confidence in the hospitals and recognising the superiority of treatment there to the treatment they can get at home, there are no means of getting that treatment except either by going to a public institution or paying the fees of a private nursing home as well as the fees for medical attendance. It is not wonderful that when the cost of medical attendance is nothing, the very moderate fees of most of our private nursing homes do not enable them to compete with State endowed institutions.

How, then, can our hospitals be legitimately used to their full extent and not abused? It is surely not beyond the art of man to devise the means. It is certain that no one inside or outside the medical profession wants to place any obstacles in the way of the poor getting the best possible medical treatment when they are ill. But if there is going to be, as seems likely, a continuous extension of hospital privileges to all classes, then the State will be bound to face an enormously increased expenditure (this has already risen for all hospital and charitable aids, from 5s. 10½d. per head of population in 1902-3 to 9s. 6¼d. in 1912-13) or steps must be taken to make those who use the hospitals pay for the help they get; if they are in a position to do so, It would be much easier to get such payment if hospital boards were to provide some accommodation, similar to that in St. Thomas' Hospital in London, for private patients who could there get all the advantages of hospital treatment by their own doctors, if they preferred it.

I do not think this would interfere with private hospitals. As the hospital habit grows more people would prefer to go to hospitals and a well managed private hospital would always be able to hold its own, so long as there are to be found people who prefer to pay more money for the sake of travelling first-class rather than second.

In one especial respect the private and public hospitals have done good social service—that is by providing for women during their confinement. We have heard at this meeting an account of the disabilities which face a prospective mother, and we all have known of many cases where domestic servants have deliberately and sometimes maliciously left a household to shift for itself when a child has been born or expected. On the side of the servant it may be said that, while to the father and the mother the coming of child is of transcendent importance, to her it means only additional work and worry. She has probably seen in her own home her mother pass through the same ordeal with little help. She knows that there will be late and early work, probably an autocratic nurse to be attended to and a still more autocratic baby.

The cure for this social difficulty is, I think, the use of the private or public nursing home. At first there was a strong prejudice against these places, but year by year they are becoming more popular. The ordinary domestic economy is less disturbed by the mother leaving her home for two or three weeks, than by the train of events which necessarily accompany a confinement in her own home.

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