

There can be no doubt that the people of New Zealand have benefited considerably. There is now no economic barrier operating against the reception of good medical care: free radiological and laboratory services are available to assist the general practitioner in his diagnosis and in the treatment of the patient, pharmaceutical services, hospital services, massage services, and even a range of artificial aids are now freely available.

These advantages have, however, been purchased only at a price, and in previous reports attention has already been called to the ever-increasing costs of benefits. Some of the factors contributing to these increased costs have also been touched on. It would be a grave mistake, however, to place the responsibility wholly upon those providing the services—the medical men, pharmacists, hospital licensees, and others. In many cases the beneficiary is equally responsible, and in others principally at fault.

It seems to be forgotten by too many of our people that health services as organized in New Zealand are a form of insurance against sickness and ill health and that, whatever form or measure of service is demanded, it must inevitably be paid for, however indirect the payment may be. All too frequently one hears the statement that so much tax is being paid and that it behoves every one to get as much in return as possible. This attitude undoubtedly accounts for many trivial and unnecessary calls on medical men and for much unnecessary prescribing and wastage of medicines. No social measures can succeed where there is a lack of social conscience.

It has been for the purpose of examining fully the present arrangements for the provision of medical and allied services and of formulating proposals for the correction of abuses and improvement of the various benefits that the Medical Services Committee, set up by the Hon. the Minister of Health in October, 1947, commenced its work towards the end of last year. Its investigations have now been completed, and the report is awaited. It is to be hoped that as the result of the Committee's deliberations the ensuing year may bring many improvements in the medical and ancillary services provided under the Social Security Act.

NEW BENEFITS

Before reviewing the existing benefits it may be appropriate to mention the additional services provided during the past year. By an extension of the Social Security (Hospital Benefits for Out-patients) Regulations 1947, provision is made for the supply, by way of out-patient benefits, of certain artificial aids.

Contact Lenses.—Persons with refractive errors which cannot be corrected by means of ordinary spectacle lenses may now obtain, through Hospital Boards, special contact lenses. The provision of this benefit has meant that patients with severe defects in vision, which in some cases would have led to complete blindness, have been able to obtain relief with the aid of these special lenses. Prior to the introduction of this benefit, contact lenses were not obtainable in New Zealand. The demand has, however, stimulated local industry, and all the lenses required can now be manufactured in this country.

Hearing Aids.—Under the regulations referred to, hearing aids are now obtainable. Persons who have a degree of deafness calling for a valve-type aid can now obtain one model free, or if they wish to purchase an imported variety may obtain a subsidy towards its cost. Here again it is pleasing to be able to say that private enterprise in New Zealand has risen to the occasion and that the hearing aid which is being distributed free by Hospital Boards is manufactured in the Dominion. This benefit has met a long-felt need, as aids have not in the past been freely available owing to the price in most cases being beyond the pocket of the majority of persons.

Hearing aid clinics have been set up at the principal hospitals to administer this benefit, and the deaf and hard of hearing may obtain a thorough professional examination, an audiometric test, and skilled advice by the clinic staff as to the use of their aids.