

DIVISION OF DENTAL HYGIENE

A significant feature of the work of the Dental Division during the past year has been the operation for the first complete year of the dental-benefits system under the Social Security Act. The inauguration of this system was noted in the last annual report, the new service having been launched on the 1st February, 1947. It is possible now to give an account of the first fourteen months' operation of the system—that is, up to the 31st March, 1948—and this appears in the appropriate section of this report.

Shortage of staff at all levels continues to hamper the effort to maintain a completely effective dental health service. As yet, the shortage of dentists in the Dominion shows little sign of immediate relief, although the marked increase in the number of students at the Otago University Dental School gives promise of a measure of relief eventually. In the meantime the Department has offered appointments to a limited number of dental surgeons in the United Kingdom, where applications were invited by advertisement towards the end of 1947.

There is a small increase in the number of school dental nurses as compared with the previous year, but the total is still far short of the number required to deal effectively with the sharp increase in the school population, an increase which has not yet reached its peak. Arrangements are in hand for the training of still more dental nurses with a view to building up the staff to the level necessary to meet this position. It is unfortunate that the age-group from which student dental nurses are drawn is at present a very restricted one as a result of the low birth-rate fifteen to twenty years ago, and there are many occupations competing for recruits from this group. This is another factor that is embarrassing the Department in its effort to maintain a high standard of dental health in the pre-school and school population.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, it is possible to record progress in various directions during the year under review, as will be seen from the following account of the activities of the Dental Division during this period.

ADOLESCENT DENTAL SERVICE

The dental service for adolescents was inaugurated on the 1st February, 1947. Pending the development of a salaried dental service, dental care for adolescents is being provided by private practitioners as a dental benefit under the Social Security Act, the practitioners being reimbursed on a fee-for-service basis. The intention is ultimately to provide dental care for adolescents until they reach nineteen years of age, but in the meantime the age is limited to the sixteenth birthday. There are two classes of dental benefits: (a) general, and (b) special.

(a) Persons eligible for enrolment for general benefits are (i) those who, being under sixteen years of age, have been discharged from a school dental clinic on passing out of the highest class under treatment and who apply for enrolment for dental benefits within three months of being so discharged, and (ii) those who, being under sixteen years of age, submit a certificate of dental fitness signed by a registered dental practitioner. (Children who are eligible for enrolment at a school dental clinic and fail to so enrol are not eligible for general dental benefits at the hands of a private practitioner.)

(b) Special dental benefits include types of treatment which are not specified in the Schedule to the Social Security (Dental Benefit) Regulations but which are usually given in a normal conservative dental practice. Those eligible for special dental benefits are (i) persons who are on the roll of a school dental clinic (these may be enrolled for treatment that is not available at such clinics), and (ii) persons who are enrolled with a private dental practitioner for general dental benefits. In all cases applications for special dental benefits must be approved by the Department.