

has been insisted on, there is still a margin in favour of the new pensions of 135. Similar results cannot be looked for again, and an increase rather than a decrease is to be expected in the near future.

There has, in consequence of this large decrease in the number of pensioners, been a corresponding shrinkage in the expenditure under the Act, and an actual cash-drop of £6,976 for the year has to be recorded. Add to this amount the sum of £2,349 recovered by Court cases and otherwise, and paid to the credit of the Consolidated Fund, together with the sum of £700 recovered since the books were closed for the year—an item properly chargeable to the year's work—and we have a cash saving of £10,000. It may be thought that with the annual liability reduced by upwards of £16,000, there should be a larger decrease in the gross payments, but it has to be borne in mind that the decrease has been gradual, and payments have been made right up to the date of cancellation in each case. It takes time for the effect of a falling-off in the number of participants, such as is recorded, to be felt, and the drop during the past year is really the result of the previous year's cancellations.

The net charge under the Act for the year was £200,844 10s. 1d.

In addition to the various provisions for the investigation of claims made by Order in Council at my request, it became incumbent on me during the year to pay special attention to one aspect of the question of granting pensions which previously I had had little opportunity to look into, and which, had opportunity offered, I would, on account of the provisions of the Act, have hesitated to touch. I refer to the question of age.

It was brought home to me from a few odd inquiries that were being made through the Department that this particular phase demanded prompt attention, and the issue of a new form was at once put in hand. This form provides that a claimant, who is unable to produce documentary evidence of age such as a birth or baptismal certificate, shall acquaint the Department with such information as will lead to evidence of age being obtained. If the claimant has been married in the colony at any time, or has had children born in the colony since the year 1876, the Registrar-General is able to give evidence of age; if the date and port of arrival in the colony and the name of the ship claimant arrived in are supplied, the Immigration or Customs records can usually supply the age at arrival, and if there is no record in the colony at all, the Agent-General in London is appealed to through the Department.

It was not long before it became abundantly clear that a large percentage of the applicants coming forward were not eligible on the score of age, and it has yet to be learned to what extent the loose provisions of the law regarding this most important qualification have been taken advantage of in the past. As is known to you, the original Act of 1898 provides for no corroborative proof of age, except in the case of the Native, and the sworn declarations of people holding responsible positions in the community have very naturally been accepted as proof of age in a great number of cases; but I very much regret to have to state that these selfsame declarations (and this applies to declarations made in regard to other important matters affecting the eligibility of claimants) have, from the point of view of correctness, been proved to be absolutely valueless. Pensioners who have been drawing for years have been found even now to be short of the required age, and these, of course, have had their pensions cancelled, but beyond that the Department has had no redress by reason of the discretionary power given to Magistrates under the Act.

I trust that at the end of the year now current I shall be in the position—which I am not in now—to report that I am satisfied that not only are all new claimants who may be admitted eligible by age, but also that the whole of the pensioners on the roll are in the same desirable position.

I must perforce acknowledge the readiness with which Magistrates have recognised the need that existed in this matter of age as in all matters affecting the granting of pensions for a stricter investigation by the officers of the Department, and the opinions expressed regarding the new order of things, which I have the honour to append, by those gentlemen with whom so much rests, are in themselves sufficient justification for the action suggested by me, and approved of by yourself.

COPY OF CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN REGISTRAR OF OLD-AGE PENSIONS AND STIPENDIARY MAGISTRATES.

YOUR WORSHIP,— Old-age Pensions Department, Wellington, N.Z., 24th July, 1903.

I should be much obliged if you would kindly give me your opinion upon the working of the new method of examination as compared with the old one.

I have, &c.,

J. EMAN SMITH, Registrar.

REPLIES.

SIR,— Magistrate's Court, Wellington, 4th September, 1903.

Your letter of the 24th July last duly received, asking me for my opinion upon the working of the new method of examination as compared with the old one.