

SIR,—

Magistrate's Court, Auckland, 20th August, 1903.

I have the honour to acknowledge the receipt of your letter dated the 24th ultimo, asking for my opinion on the working of the new rules under the Old-age Pensions Act as compared with the old ones.

In deciding pension claims, what the Magistrate requires is the assistance of some one to ascertain the truth or otherwise of the evidence given by the claimant as to his fulfilment of the conditions in section 8 of the Act; in a number of cases the claimant's own evidence is inconclusive or unreliable, and the only way to arrive at the truth is for independent inquiries to be made.

I can say that I have noticed lately a decided improvement in the accuracy and completeness of the information supplied to the Court.

I have to apologize for my delay in replying to your communication, which was overlooked until your telegram called attention to it.

I have, &c.,

HUBERT W. BRABANT, S.M.

SIR,—

New Plymouth, 3rd August, 1903.

Your letter of the 24th July last—No. 03/2357—duly received, and I should have replied earlier, only I was away on circuit at Stratford and Opunake.

With regard to the new method of examination of pensioners, I think it is admirable, and is very much superior to the old one. The examination is searching and complete.

I have, &c.,

R. L. STANFORD, Stipendiary Magistrate.

SIR,—

Magistrate's Office, Palmerston North, 12th March, 1904.

I am in receipt of your letters of the 5th January and the 9th March *re* the working of the new method of examination of pension claims and renewals.

I had not overlooked the matter, but desired some further experience before replying.

On the whole, I find the new regulations work very well indeed, and the information obtained under them insures much greater accuracy, while at the same time being a very great saving of time to Magistrates.

I have, &c.,

AND. D. THOMSON, Stipendiary Magistrate.

Another important qualification for a pension which I desire to refer to is that required by subsection (2) of section 8 of the original Act, which provides that an applicant shall have resided continuously in New Zealand for a period of not less than twenty-five years before he is entitled to receive a pension. The evidence on this point should be of the most convincing nature supplied from the most reliable sources, and, although there may be abundant evidence that the claimant arrived or was in the colony twenty-five years previously, it does not follow as a matter of course that he has been in New Zealand all that time. Sight must not be lost of the fact that three and a half days' steam connects New Zealand with a large European population of close upon four millions, of which number considerably over 150,000 are sixty-five years of age and upwards, and, although several of the Australian States have their old-age pensions schemes, it behoves us to be properly safeguarded. It should not be difficult for a claimant who has qualified by residence to prove the fact; but if the evidence submitted on this point is as unreliable as that submitted in regard to age, then I am afraid we have pensioners on the rolls who have no right to be there.

In the matter of the gross misstatements made by pensioners in the past above referred to, much difficulty has been experienced by the Department in obtaining convictions under the penal clauses of the Act, owing to the fact that in a great number of instances little or no evidence could be found on the Court papers of the questions asked and the answers given. Magistrates could not be asked to convict where the evidence was wanting, although it has been made abundantly manifest by the system now in vogue that some ex-pensioners would have only been getting their just deserts if sentenced to a term of imprisonment for making wilfully false statements.

You will be pleased to learn that no such possibility is likely to arise again, as an accurate and complete record of each pensioner has now been compiled, and is kept filed in the various Courts throughout the colony for reference, giving the financial position, the questions asked, the answers given, and the verification thereof, with the full circumstances under which the Magistrate granted the pension, renewed, or refused it. Upon a pensioner transferring from one district to another, his record follows him, and is filed at the Court nearest the place where he elects to reside, so that at a glance the new Magistrate and the new Deputy Registrar are in possession of the pensioner's full history. This system saves the pensioner and the Department alike much labour and trouble when an application for renewal is under consideration, and attempts at fraud are reduced to a minimum.

I would respectfully draw attention to the fact that a sum exceeding £3,300 has been recovered during the years 1902-3 and 1903-4, and paid to the credit of the Public Account. This is the result of Court proceedings and demands made for overpayments found to have been made in the past through the true positions of pensioners not having been stated. If to this sum is added £700 recovered since the books were closed, it will be found that, notwithstanding the enormous clerical work necessitated by the thorough investigation alluded to, the total cost of administering the Act for the past year has been more than defrayed.