

The figures for the past few years show that a very fair percentage of the will-making population of the Dominion is availing itself of the advantages offered by the Office. Regarding the matter solely from the point of view of the public, I am quite satisfied that no branch of the Office work is more useful or beneficial than the free drawing of wills. It is undoubtedly to the advantage of the community that everybody with property to dispose of should do so by will instead of leaving it to the necessarily rigid and often cruel operation of the stereotyped rules governing intestacy. The Office business discloses very many cases where, for the lack of a will, dependants and others with strong moral claims on a deceased are left penniless, whilst the Public Trustee has to go searching in the United Kingdom and elsewhere for the next-of-kin, who, when found, take everything.

LEGAL DIVISION.

84. The legal work of the Department is under the control and supervision of the Office solicitor at Wellington. He is assisted by a number of assistant solicitors to carry out the conveyancing and common-law activities of the Office.

Following upon the policy of decentralization which was adopted some years ago, legal officers have been attached to a number of the branches to perform on the spot the legal duties assigned to them in connection with the business transacted at these centres. In general, the branch legal officers carry out all conveyancing transactions arising in the course of the administration of estates dealt with at their respective branches. They deal with all ordinary Magistrate's Court work, prepare local wills, and attend to other matters deputed to them. In consequence of this arrangement there is effected a saving of the time which would be spent by the reference of all the legal work to the Head Office.

Matters of difficulty involving controversial points or matters requiring research are, however, all referred to the Office solicitor for his opinion and direction, and he exercises a general supervision over the legal officers at the branches. From time to time the district offices are visited by a solicitor from Head Office, who reviews and inspects the work of the branch legal officer. This ensures that a high standard of work is maintained at the branches and that a uniformity of practice prevails.

The greatest care is exercised in providing the legal staff throughout the Department to see that it is competent and qualified to carry out the large volume of work entrusted to it. As I have said before, the staff of the Office gains an exceptionally wide experience in the questions with which it is called upon to deal. For example, several thousands of wills are prepared or perused annually. Moreover, in the administration of nearly 16,000 estates with which the Office has to do every variety of legal question has to be dealt with. Thus, in conveyancing, no business day passes that large numbers of conveyancing or trust instruments are not passed forward. By this I do not mean merely formal official documents, but transfers, conveyances, leases, settlements, deeds of family arrangement, agreements, mortgages, powers of attorney, and so forth. All the foregoing are either drawn or perused by the legal staff.

There is a well-equipped and up-to-date law library at the Head Office in Wellington, and the District Solicitors are furnished with such text-books as are requisite to enable them to carry out their duties effectively.

During the past year the number of applications to the Supreme Court for grant of probate totalled 739. This total includes a number of applications made on behalf of the Public Trustee by solicitors in private practice who, for various reasons, had been entrusted with this work. During the same period there were 236 applications for a grant of an order to administer on an intestacy, these figures including certain applications made by private practitioners. Compared with the number of applications made in the preceding year, there was an increase of twenty-three in probate motions and a decrease of eleven in the motions for administration on an intestacy.

In dealing with the various classes of estates reported for administration I have made reference to the decrease in the number of persons dying intestate. This is only to be expected, seeing that a greater proportion of the population is executing wills.