

PART VII.—DENTAL HYGIENE.

I have the honour to submit the following report on the work of the Dental Division for the year ending 31st March, 1939. A brief historical review is also included on this occasion.

HISTORICAL.

The inception of the Division of Dental Hygiene dates back to the year 1919, when, immediately following the Great War, the Government of the day decided to institute a School Dental Service. To this end six dental surgeons were appointed, and were attached to the staff of the Education Department. They were stationed at Warkworth, Auckland, Wanganui, Wellington, Christchurch, and Dunedin. In 1920 a Chief Dental Officer was appointed, and the officer selected for this position was Colonel T. A. Hunter, C.B.E., Director of the New Zealand Army Dental Service during the Great War.

Colonel Hunter's proposal for developing the School Dental Service was that the main personnel should consist of specially selected young women trained as school dental nurses. This proposal was regarded by many as a revolutionary one, and it gave rise to a spirited controversy within the ranks of the dental profession, a large section of whom feared that a satisfactory school service could not be built up on such lines.

The controversy continued for many months, and was even carried into the daily press. Eventually, the New Zealand Dental Association gave their formal approval of the proposal, and the first draft of young women to undergo training as dental nurses was appointed in 1921.

At the time of writing, nineteen years after this controversy took place, the dental-nurse personnel of the School Dental Service is accepted by the profession and the public alike as an established part of the dental organization of the Dominion. The services of school dental nurses are in demand throughout the country, an indication that they have earned the confidence of the public. On the professional side it can be said that, within their special sphere, the dental nurses maintain a standard of treatment that meets with the approval of the profession. This is evidenced by the reports of successive external examiners (practising dental surgeons) who conduct the final examinations for dental nurses, as well as by the comments of dental practitioners into whose hands school dental clinic patients have passed.

The first dental nurses, then, to commence training were appointed in 1921. Thereafter, except for one or two years, drafts varying in number from fifteen to forty were appointed annually between the years 1921 and 1930.

In the meantime an administrative change had been made, and the School Dental Service, along with the School Medical Service, was transferred from the Education Department to the reconstituted Department of Health, and the former Chief Dental Officer of the Education Department became the Director of the Division of Dental Hygiene in the Department of Health.

Premises to be used as a training-school and headquarters of the Dental Division were secured in the Army Base Records Building, which had been built during the war in the grounds of the main Government Building, Wellington, and this new clinic was equipped, for the most part, with equipment taken over from the Army Dental Corps.

Mr. Richmond Dunn was appointed to take charge of the training of the dental nurses, and he continued in that capacity until 1924, when he retired.

A two years' course was decided upon, and in 1923 the first dental nurses completed their course, and were allocated to school dental clinics in the field.

From 1923 onward new clinics were established in the field each year, according to the number of dental nurses available. By the year 1930 the School Dental Service had been developed to the extent that approximately half of the pupils of the primary schools of the Dominion were receiving regular and systematic dental treatment. The staff at that time numbered 188. There were 147 treatment centres, and 60,289 children were under treatment.

At this stage the world-wide financial depression made itself felt in the Dominion, and from then until early in 1936 it was impossible to do more than maintain the position that had been reached. An administrative change was made in 1930, when, owing to the growth of the service, it was deemed necessary to have more localized control. A policy of decentralization was therefore carried out, the Dominion being organized into four districts, each under the control of a District Dental Superintendent. This number has since been increased to five.

At the end of 1935 a policy of rapid expansion of the School Dental Service was decided upon, with the object of completing the service, and making it available to all the primary schools in the Dominion, within a period of five years. The progress that has been made in this connection is described in detail elsewhere in this report. It may be stated here, however, that the plans for expansion included the erection of a modern dental clinic and training-school in Wellington, which would fulfil the dual function of a treatment centre for the children of the Wellington metropolitan area, of whom there are some 15,000, and at the same time be a training centre to supply the whole Dominion with school dental nurses. The foundation stone of this building was laid by the Prime Minister (Right Hon. M. J. Savage, P.C., D.C.L.) on the 30th April, 1938, and it is expected that the building will be in use before the end of 1939. At the date of this report—31st March, 1939—the School Dental Service had been developed to the extent that the treatment centres numbered 279, and 94,261 children were receiving regular dental treatment and instruction in oral hygiene. The professional staff had increased to 18 dental officers, 3 trained nurses, and 210 school dental nurses, together with 138 student dental nurses undergoing training, a total of 369.