

8. Have maternity homes, State nurses, &c., been of pecuniary advantage to the poorer classes?

Private maternity homes have been of very great advantage to patients, and in many cases it is more economical to go into a home than for the patient to remain in her own house; their greatest use is for country cases. The State maternity homes have, I believe, been largely resorted to, but I have no special knowledge of these institutions, except what I have learnt from the reports in the newspapers. I can say the same of the State nurses, I think—that if their services were confined to the proper class of patients they would be of very great service to a large number of women.

9. Have high rents in cities a tendency to keep workers in slum districts or in insanitary dwellings?

I do not think we have any districts in Christchurch that we could describe as “slums.” Certainly there are some streets chiefly occupied by the poorest class of people, but unless they are dissipated, dissolute, and idle they need not suffer any acute poverty. Almost without exception, the poverty-stricken homes are the result of misconduct of one kind or another. Where the poverty is due to sickness, adequate relief is forthcoming either from the State or from private sources, or from both. There is no need for any one who is able and willing to work to suffer want in New Zealand. I repeat that almost without exception poverty is self-inflicted where it exists—I mean, of course, want and destitution. It is true that some families are not as well housed as they should be, sometimes from no fault of their own, but, generally speaking, the working-classes have good houses; many have very superior dwellings fitted with every reasonable comfort and much refinement. There has been a very great advance in the quality of houses of every class during the past fifteen years; in many cases there is a tendency to excessive and useless decoration. The rents of some classes of houses have advanced during the past fifteen years, perhaps 25 per cent. or more, but for this increased rent a better and more commodious house is obtained, and one fitted with labour-saving and sanitary conveniences far in advance of former years. On the other hand, older houses in very good condition let at lower rents than they formerly fetched, say, fifteen years ago. Upon the whole I cannot say that there is any tendency by high rents to keep people in slum districts or in insanitary dwellings. The people as a whole are well housed, infinitely better than they were fifteen or twenty years ago. Seeing that labour has gone up 50 per cent., and building-material and land also increased in price, it follows that rents must also increase.

10. Speaking generally, is there greater tendency to disease in the average man or woman than was the case twenty years ago?

I should say, decidedly not. I believe the health of the people is much better than it was twenty years ago, notwithstanding some disadvantages, the latter chiefly caused by improper diet and bad habits. The general condition of people is better. They are better housed, understand the value of fresh air by day and night, and I believe upon the whole pay more attention to cookery and to food generally. The people are more alert, more sensitive, and observant—in a word, more alive and more thoughtful, and study to make more out of their lives, and to watch more carefully over their health and that of their families; but I must add that many are apt to rely too much on their own opinion in matters of health, and do not resort to the advice of the doctor as early and as frequently as they should, and sometimes this neglect has disastrous results. I have seen many lives absolutely lost for want of seeking timely advice. Upon the whole, I think that the improved conditions of living, the better houses, better knowledge of how to live, the higher value set upon human life will continue to raise the standard of health and happiness and enjoyment of the whole of the people. Unfortunately, there are still some dread diseases which baffle the most skilful healers in the world, but the general advance in medical and surgical knowledge has been so great—and much of this is communicable to the people—that diseases have been robbed of many of their terrors and can be often prevented. I might add that I think there is an increase in some nervous disorders, but I repeat emphatically that the general standard of health has improved during the past fifteen years. In the case of mothers of families I must, however, admit I have observed many cases of general ill health. Often she cannot obtain that rest and, what is of great value, change of air and environment at suitable periods. One of the most urgent needs of the community is convalescent homes for adults and children, either free or at a moderate charge. Such homes would contribute much to the improved health of the people. I consider that every one should resort to a change at least once a year, but the greatest value of change of air, either to seaside or to the hills, is after an illness; its results are then often quite magical.

11. If the cost of living, due to high rents, costly food, &c., is on the increase, would that account for a higher rate of nervous or mental disease?

When the earnings are only sufficient to maintain the home there must be some anxiety as to ways and means and for the future; but so long as a man or a woman has good average health they are not depressed by such responsibility. It is when the nervous system is weakened or depressed from any cause that worry begins; good health naturally carries with it a hopeful disposition, but when the health is impaired mental depression is apt to follow. I cannot say that hard work, or some hard times, is a real cause of mental disease or nervous disorder. When this ensues there is probably a constitutional tendency or ethical cause in that direction, so that I cannot answer this question in the affirmative. There is apparently a considerable increase in the number of cases afflicted with mental disorders. I have noted that in many of these cases it is self-inflicted by some form of dissipation. It must be remembered that, side by side with the increased cost of living, wages have advanced in an equal ratio. The altered conditions have pressed more heavily on some members of the professional classes and on those of moderate independent means.