

DEPARTMENTAL AND STAFF MATTERS

In last year's report reference was made to the fact that, owing to the additional work placed upon the shoulders of the Under-Secretary for Justice by his appointment as Under-Secretary of Native Affairs and Secretary to the Cook Islands, it had been found necessary to place the headquarters administration of the Prisons Department directly under the control of the Inspector of Prisons. This arrangement having been found entirely satisfactory, and the work of the prisons administration having continued to increase, the Minister in Charge decided early in the current year to reconstitute "Prisons" as a separate Department, with the Inspector of Prisons as its permanent head. The definite separation of the Prisons Department from the Justice Department took place as from the 1st May last, the change being effected without incurring any additional expenditure. It is hoped that the opportunity now given for specialization, which is absolutely essential where progress in the work of reform is required, will enable the new administration successfully to carry on the Minister's programme of improvement in the general prison system.

Although, as stated last year, an endeavour was made to prevent further depletion of the Prisons staffs by obtaining the exemption of officers who were called up in the ballots, we have been unable to keep the staffs up to their full strength. Not only are some of the prisons and prison institutions undermanned, but the quality of the staffs has been much reduced by the necessary employment of a number of temporary officers who are not up to the requisite standard. Wherever possible returned soldiers have been selected to fill vacancies, but few if any of them have remained more than a very short period in the Prison service. However, we are only suffering in common with other branches of the Public Service, and must continue to carry on as efficiently as possible under somewhat adverse conditions.

Eighteen of our officers are still absent with the Expeditionary Forces, two are on home service, two have returned wounded or invalided during the year and have resumed duty, while two, Warders R. W. Thompson and L. K. Beresford, have been killed in action.

The progress made in our building operations at Paparua (Templeton) enabled us to raise that prison to the second grade and to place a Gaoler in charge. The position was filled by the promotion of Chief Warder C. J. Knight, of the Auckland Prison staff. The Waikeria buildings having also been extended during the year, it became necessary to gazette it as a reformatory and to place a responsible officer in control. This appointment was conferred upon Chief Warder J. Down, who has been Acting Officer in Charge since 1914. Other promotions of senior officers that have been made since my last report was written are—Chief Warder Kearney, from second grade Chief Warder to first grade, in succession to Mr. Knight at Auckland; Principal Warder W. T. Leggett, to the rank of Chief Warder and Acting Officer in Charge of the Invercargill Borstal Institution; and Principal Warder J. T. Reid, of Lyttelton, to the rank of Chief Warder at the Paparua Prison. Other consequential promotions have also been made.

The conduct of the officers generally has been entirely satisfactory, but in a few cases punishments have been necessary in order to maintain discipline. One probationary warder was convicted of trafficking with prisoners and was summarily dismissed.

The appointment of the Inspector of Prisons as permanent head of the Department has rendered it necessary for the bulk of the inspection work to be carried out by the Deputy Inspector and Supervisor of Works (Mr. M. Hawkins). He has visited the different institutions very frequently during the year, and has supplied me with valuable reports and recommendations regarding any special matters coming under his notice. Mr. Hawkins's thorough practical knowledge of building-construction and other works has enabled the Department to carry on a number of undertakings with expedition and economy, and without the employment of any outside assistance for supervision.

The Gaolers and officers in charge of institutions have maintained their record for good and consistent work, and the thanks of the Department are due to them for the highly efficient manner in which they have carried out their duties during the past year.

HEALTH STATISTICS.

From the return of sickness given in Table A it appears that the daily average on the sick-list is greater by 2.51 than in 1916, but, as has been pointed out in previous reports, the increase shown in the table is invariably due to the committal to prison of chronic cases who remain in the public hospitals or in the prison infirmaries during the greater part of their sentence. There has been no actual increase in the amount of sickness within the prisons during the year, the general health of the inmates having been up to the usual high standard expected in such institutions.

Deaths.—There were six deaths and one suicide in the prisons during the year 1917.

PRISONERS DETENTION ACT, 1915.

Five male prisoners and one female prisoner have been detained at Auckland, and one male prisoner at Lyttelton, under the provisions of the Act. Nine prisoners were brought under its provisions in 1916, so that since the Act was passed in 1915 we have a total of sixteen prisoners who have been found to be affected with venereal disease, and have therefore been detained beyond the period fixed by their sentences until free from infection. All those specially detained were short-sentence prisoners who could not be fully cured before their terms expired. Long-sentence prisoners are, of course, attended to within the period of their sentence. In such cases the application of the provisions of the Prisoners Detention Act is unnecessary.