

"SHOCKED" BACK TO HEALTH

Psychiatric Nursing at Mental Hospitals

"WOULD anyone care to act as a subject, just for purposes of a demonstration?"

Everybody giggled and drew back. "Come on, what about you, nurse?" said the doctor, as he did things with the switches of what looked like a small radio set; "I won't turn the current on."

To the relief of members of a party of pressmen and women visiting Porirua Mental Hospital, the nurse agreed. She lay down comfortably on a bed and allowed two metal clamps to be placed on her head. But the switches were not touched.

"And that's about as much as I can show you; you would not, perhaps, care to see the real thing," said the doctor.

The demonstration was of the apparatus used at Porirua for giving patients the electric shock treatment which has been found successful in certain cases. This, and other methods of treatment of the mentally sick, are the answer to the popular suggestion that once a patient enters a mental hospital, he lives and dies there, or that such a hospital is a place to which one can conveniently consign a relative who has suffered a mental breakdown, and then comfortably forget all about him.

Encouraging Results

The application of psychiatric treatment has gone ahead rapidly in recent years. It is a special branch of medical science, dealing with the causes, symptoms, and course of treatment of disorders of the mind. Its ultimate aim is to find the best means of promoting normal thought and action. In all our mental hospitals research work goes on continuously and the results are encouraging.

Shock treatment, which is given primarily to people suffering from acute depression or over-excitability, has been used at Porirua for the last 15 months. It has a considerable physical effect on the patient, and nurses and attendants stand by to see that the convulsions produced do not result in injury to him. The average shock is 120 volts for a fifth of a second, producing metabolic and electrical changes in the nerves, and so in appropriate cases aiding recovery.

The results, so far, have been very good—85 per cent. of the depressed cases and 83 per cent. of the excited cases treated having been discharged from the hospital. From March of last year to date, about 150 treatments have been given. In this, and other treatments, the nurses assist, for it is all part of their psychiatric training. Thus they become very important members of the curative community.

Patients' Appreciation

As the visitors went through a sunny ward on the men's side of the hospital, one patient, a middle-aged man who had been a successful farmer, had something to say in appreciation of his treatment at Porirua.

Overwork and insomnia, he said, had caused a breakdown. He had had two

shock treatments. "If you had seen me when I came in you would not believe that I am the same man," he said. "I have had two trips to town and I am going to apply for permission to leave in a few days."

"And I will see that you get it," said the Medical Superintendent. "You have come on very well indeed."

Another man spoke on similar lines. He could not say too much in favour of the shock treatment; it was wonderful in its curative effect, he said.

Mental hospitals are just like others in the way the patients come and go, for there are varying degrees of ailment. The main need, in many cases, is a rest from the worries and pressures of everyday life. The patients enter an atmosphere of kindness, sympathy, understanding, and hope—an atmosphere which can be produced and maintained more readily when the nursing staff is up to strength.

It is for this work—psychiatric nursing in general—that Porirua, and indeed practically all mental hospitals in New Zealand, need more staff. Only by working normal hours instead of under the present pressure can the nurses carry out their jobs properly. It is true that a girl probationer enters a new world—unfamiliar, strange and, perhaps, forbidding at first. But if she is of the right type, the occupation can be intensely interesting.

Work with the Hands

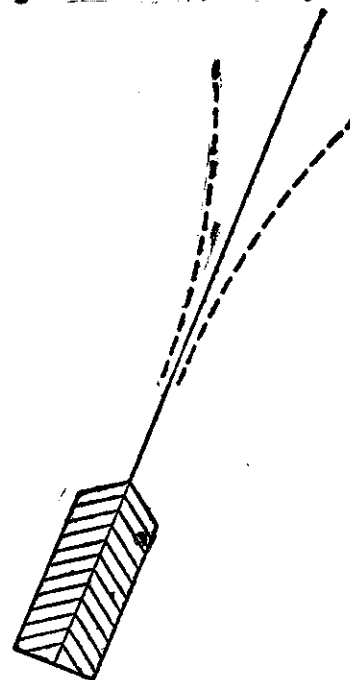
Courses of lectures and demonstrations are given by the medical officers and tutor sisters to enable a girl to qualify for State registration as a psychiatric nurse and gain promotion to higher positions in hospitals. A special school of occupational therapy plays a large part in the return of a patient to normal, and tuition is given in constructing all sorts of articles in wood, metals, leather, seagrass, wool, and other fibres. Some patients work on the farm, others in the flower and vegetable gardens; still others have jobs in the store, workshops, laundry and kitchens of the hospital.

And as for the nurses themselves, the hospital authorities do their best to make the work attractive to the right type of girl. Bedrooms are airy and sunny and there is plenty of accommodation. "Our only regret is that it is not all full," the medical superintendent of Porirua remarked to a staff reporter of *The Listener*. A nurse may have a room to herself or two or three friends can share a room, just as they please.

There are ample means for recreation outdoors, while the big sitting room serves admirably for a concert or a dance. Some of the girls have taken up billiards enthusiastically and there are experts with the cue who would give many a male player a handicap and beat him.

Nor are the nurses isolated from the city. Each night, except Sunday, there is a special "picture bus" to Wellington and back, and railway transport is always available.

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