

NO MORE HOUSEMAID'S KNEE

Science Comes to the Aid of Household Staff in Hospitals

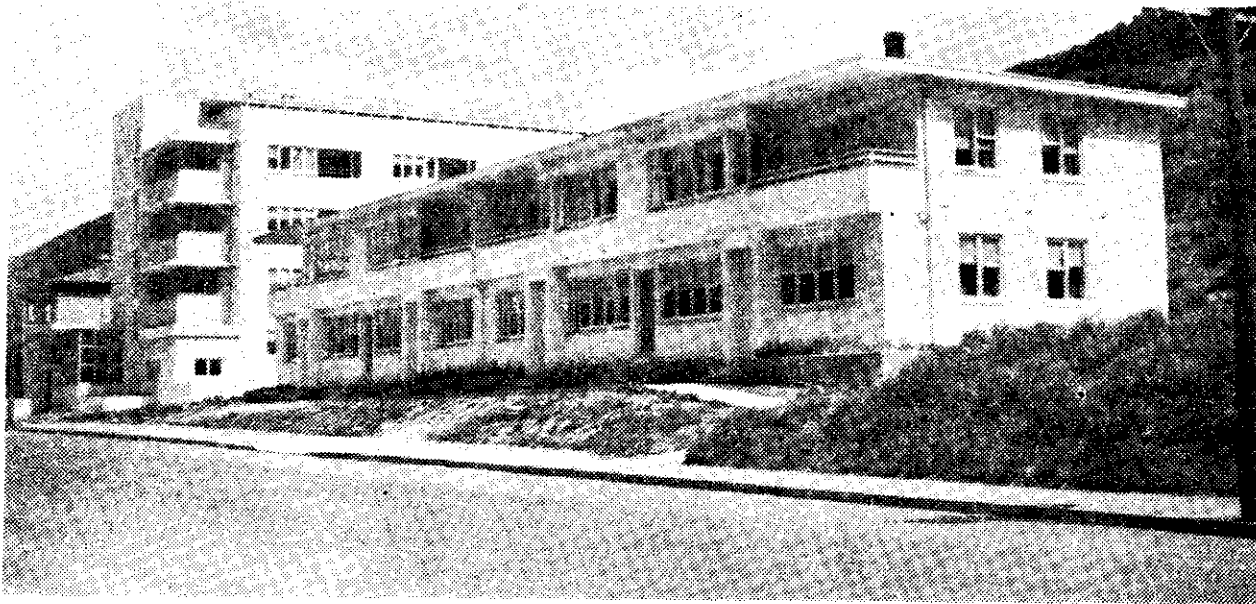
"HOW many are there in your family?"

Dr. John Cairney, Superintendent-in-Chief of the Wellington Hospital and its branches, blew out a cloud of pipe smoke. "Oh, about 3,000, I should say, counting patients, medical staff, nurses, and household staff. And I'm about 150 short in the household staff," he said, in reply to *The Listener's* question.

Throughout New Zealand main hospital authorities are troubled about the shortages of household staffs—they are no longer called domestics—and so a national campaign for staff has been launched on their behalf by the National Employment Service. About 500 young women are needed to bring these staffs to normal, to relieve overworked people and to allow hospitals to be run efficiently.

As part of its campaign, which includes broadcasting and the showing of films, the Employment Service asked a number of journalists to make a tour of the Wellington, Hutt, and Silverstream hospitals to see conditions under which the household staff works, to ask what questions they cared to and then to record their impressions. Conditions in other hospitals being practically the same, Wellington could be taken as a fair example, we were told.

It was a conducted tour, in the sense that the party was accompanied by hospital officials. By the time we had walked up and down stairs and through endless corridors with the antiseptic smell mingling pleasantly with cigarette smoke, and sniffed the contents of dozens of pots simmering in kitchens, we were "hospitalised." But we had seen some unusual labour-saving machinery. From the household point of view all there was to see was shown to us.



ROOMS HERE for 112 girls—if they want them. A view of the Hanson Street Flats, Wellington.



Three members of the Hutt Hospital's household staff

When looking over one of the bedrooms in the Hanson Street flats, for the accommodation of household staff, one member of the party said to the Matron-in-Chief (Miss B. Clark): "What's the rent of this room? Whatever it is, I'll take it." To which Miss Clark replied: "I would hand the rooms over to 112 young women right now if I could find them."

Candid Answers

Our tour started with the food department at the Wellington main hospital where girls were buttering bread with the speed of a conjuror. We asked questions such as the good old stager: "Are you happy in your work?" And then: "Is the pay all right? Are conditions pleasant? How long have you been here?" It seemed clear that there had been no drilling of the staffs in the way they should answer. They were candid. One girl told us she thought she should have more pay; they all said they liked the work.

The biggest thing in favour of the kitchen job was the absence of the usual drudgery. Machines do almost everything. They peel vegetables and wash dishes; stainless steel fittings made cleaning easy; pieces of apparatus—a bacon-cutter for instance—are cleaned and sterilised in a few seconds with a steam jet. Some women have been there between 15 and 20 years; perhaps more than anyone they appreciate the modern steam and electric cooking.

In one kitchen we saw an elderly woman trimming rashers of bacon. She said she had retired from business; she liked cooking and, knowing that the hospital was in difficulties over staff, had gone along to do her share. Of course she was paid for it, but she was on her feet for the greater part of the day.

A girl in one of the diet rooms said frankly that she loved the job and would not go back to office work for all the fruit juice in America. And ap-

parently the Hospital Board is doing its best to attract household staff, for it is now building retiring rooms where clothes can be changed and girls can take a rest. There will be five bedrooms for those living on the premises.

A New Type of Uniform

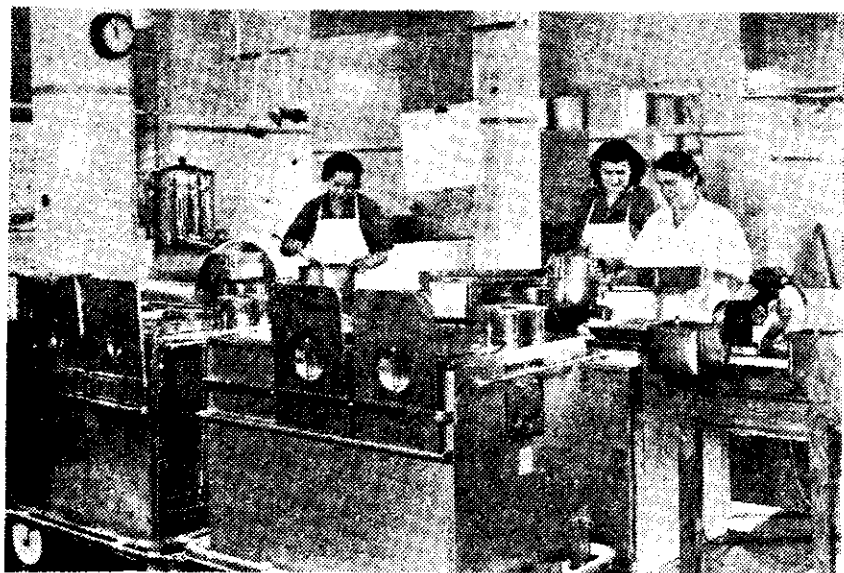
In the past week or so a new uniform has been designed. It is of deep apricot colour, replacing the old drab blue. And it has a wide overlap, allowing more freedom of movement. Though in most private houses floor-cleaning is still done on bended knee, the hospital floors are cleaned by outside contractors. Housemaid's knee is a thing of the past.

At the main hospital the staff shortage is most serious in its effect in the laundry. The day we were there men had to be taken off their jobs to do work usually performed by girls. Sheets, pillowslips, uniforms came along in mountainous piles, and it looked as if the day's work could never end. The laundry is not the pleasantest place to work in. Some of the girls complained that the heat made them drowsy; that they were apt to catch chills, and that the concrete floors played up with their feet. But as soon as a Board member heard this complaint boards to cover the floors were promised.

One girl said that she had been there for seven years and it was "not bad at all," for there was little hand-ironing, most of it being done by machinery. Another who has been in the laundry a good deal longer said: "I wouldn't be here if I didn't like it—plenty of jobs about." It's all a matter of taste.

New Laundry Planned

But the Board intends to build a completely new laundry block as soon as it has the authority. Some time ago the chairman (H. F. Toogood) and Dr. Cairney went to Australia to investigate laundry conditions and machinery. They said that when the new block is built the plant will be as up to date as any in the world.



In the kitchen at Hutt Hospital