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Orphanages Without Orphans

THE writer of this article asks whether we should congratulate ourselves when we find enough money to build a new orphanage, or hang our heads in shame. She had been asking herself that question for years when the arrival of the Curtis Report from Britain made her feel that she must ask other people as well. Her initials will be well known to those who take an interest in the difficult problems of child welfare.



FOLLOWING the investigations of a Committee of Enquiry, whose recommendations—published in the Curtis Report—have been accepted by the United Kingdom Government and become law, the upbringing of nearly 140,000 children will be affected and their prospects in life brightened.

These reforms should stimulate us to take stock of the position in New Zealand.

Here, apart from Governmental care, children deprived of home life are mostly brought up in large institutions. This method is costly, long out of date and in no way a satisfactory substitute

for family life. Institutions are artificial in atmosphere and were introduced in the last century when social conditions were very different. Widows' pensions were unknown, family allowances had not been introduced, and many families through misadventure found themselves destitute. Although called Orphanages, there are few orphans in these places. In one large Home—a typical example—

about 60 per cent. of the children have both parents living, 40 per cent. one parent, and there

may be one, perhaps two, orphans. This is a surprise to many people, who naturally conclude that orphanages contain orphans.

Written for "The Listener" by D.M.M.

Uprooted Children

The English educationist David Wills said recently, "We must never forget that the child who enters an institution is a casualty—one whose life has been disrupted and whose emotional ties have been rudely torn." Would it not be a great step forward if we reduced these casualties by refusing to admit children whose only qualification may be that they have lost one parent? Far better to use funds if necessary to supplement the widow's income and to encourage her in every way to keep her family intact. The same might apply to widowers and, in suitable cases, to broken homes and divorced parents. Where separation is the result of matrimonial conflict, and unhappiness—perhaps caused by, or leading to, insobriety—could not the Marriage Guidance Councils first try to straighten out the tangle? Better surely to patch up the ship than submit to a total wreck.

Haphazard Admissions

The crux of the matter lies with the Admissions Committees. No one should be elected to this office who thinks the children lucky to be placed in such institutions—they are often told how fortunate they are to be there—or that the institution they are interested in is an exceptionally good one. Only those who soberly realise that in admitting a child they are causing a casualty should have these powers, and every possible alternative should be investigated before this last drastic step is taken. It is important, too, that members of Admission Committees should have some understanding of child psychology.

Committees vary in methods of admission. The best I know is one where three independent officials investigate the case, and only if they are all finally agreed is a child admitted. There are others so haphazard that a family may be admitted by merely applying to the matron, and we may have the spectacle of one parent putting children in a Home without the knowledge and consent of the other parent. That there are many genuine cases that must be given refuge no one can deny, but if only these were accepted for whom

nothing better is possible, numbers would dwindle and the remaining children would enjoy the individual care and affection so essential to their happiness.

Brothers and Sisters Separated

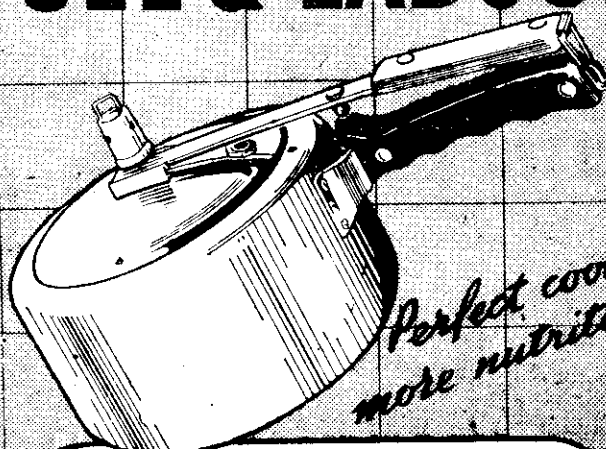
In most institutions, except in the case of very young children, the sexes are separated. First a home is broken up, and the children perhaps transported many miles from their home town. We then proceed to break up the family, with brothers and sisters often in different towns. I know one Home where the brothers are in the South Island, the sisters in the North. The parents often become indifferent and these families grow up as strangers and eventually enter the community with no social background whatsoever. I know a boy who had not seen his sister for nine years, another of 14 years who has just met a sister for the first time. To watch some of the meetings is pathetic. A little girl who had the unusual experience of spending a few days with a younger brother burst out at intervals with "You are my brother, you are my brother?" as if it were too wonderful for belief. There is a case of a young man and woman who met at a dance and became interested in each other before they discovered they were brother and sister. Is it any wonder that institution children are shy and self-conscious with the other sex when they do meet later in the community? It may be argued that they mix in school, but this amounts to very little. It is living together and mixing freely that counts. There are even Homes where mere toddlers are bathed in separate bathrooms and so the natural way of bringing home to them their physical differences is lost.

Sex Problems

The fear of sex complications is, of course, the reason for this timid policy. But surely it must be realised that the dangers of segregation are much more serious than those of co-education. To show that co-education is not impracticable, I could point to at least one Home in this country run on co-education lines which works admirably. Brothers and sisters, boys and girls all live happily together, until they finally leave to go and work in the community, and in this Home there is a father as well as a mother substitute. Sex apparently has no terrors here and the children are friendly and self-confident. The Committee seems unaware that their Home is unusual, and the complacency so common in most Homes is absent.

Institutional life is sometimes compared with boarding schools; but people hardly appreciate the difference between

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