

## A SUBNORMALITY SERVICE IN EIRE

by

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### General Survey of Services

In Eire, public interest in Mental Subnormality has never been so high as it is just now. The establishment, last year, of the Commission to examine this whole question has been widely acclaimed. Even within the past two years, several new bodies have commenced work on different aspects of the problem. What was very much an unfashionable field, has now become the focus of considerable attention.

It would be very wrong, however, to assume that until recently no efforts had been made towards helping the Mentally Handicapped in Eire. The Government White Paper of 1959 states that 2,600 beds were that year available for the Mentally Handicapped in Special Institutions throughout the country. In relation to our population of two and three-quarter million, this figure gives a Bed Ratio which compares favourably with the similar figure in Great Britain.

At this point, it is important to recognise that the services for the Subnormal in Eire have evolved out of cultural, religious, and economic conditions peculiar to this country. The resultant forces have determined the form assumed by these services. So it is, that by far the greater part of the present services are run by Religious Orders, assisted by Voluntary Bodies. The State, recognising the value of their dedicated efforts, has been satisfied to assist and encourage these workers, rather than participate directly in this field.

The Brothers of St. John of God care for approximately 800 male patients, in their three centres at Obelisk Park, Dublin, Drumcar, Co. Louth, and Celbridge, Co. Kildare. 240 beds for Severe and Moderately Handicapped are provided in the Stewart's Institution, Co. Dublin, which is the longest established Institution of this kind in Eire. In Lota, Co. Cork, there are 240 boys under the care of the Brothers of Charity, who maintain a similar institution in Clarenbridge, Co. Galway. Smaller numbers are catered for by the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary at Delvin, Co. Westmeath, and by the Order of La Sagesse, Sligo. Additional accommodation is being provided at these two centres.

Voluntary bodies in Dublin, Dundalk, Waterford and Limerick have opened Day Centres and Special Schools, and have instituted After-Care services. The Cork Polio and General After-Care Association has been very active in opening several Special Schools and Day Centres in Cork, as well as fostering a Parents' Association.

The Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent De Paul control institutions housing 1,100 Mentally Handicapped persons of all creeds from both Southern and Northern Ireland. This figure represents 40% of the total number of Mentally Handicapped maintained in institutions in Eire. These patients have always been admitted on a voluntary or informal basis, as is the procedure in all other Subnormality Institutions in Eire. The main purpose of this article is to describe the evolution and working of this service provided by the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent De Paul.

### The Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent De Paul

In 1924, the late Archbishop Byrne of Dublin requested the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent De Paul to undertake the care of the Mentally Handicapped in Eire. Recognising the urgent nature of the work, and feeling that it came very much within the scope of their vocation as laid down by their founder, Saint Vincent De



Junior Stream "A" Class : Special School, Holy Angels, Glenmaroon.  
Occupational Therapy Class : St. Vincent's, Cabra.

Paul, the Sisters agreed readily to the request of the Archbishop. The premises of the North Dublin Union which, up to this time, had been used as a Poor Law School, were rented from the Dublin Union and re-named St. Vincent's Home, Cabra. Initially, patients were transferred here from all over Ireland, from the various County Homes or Poor Law Institutions which had been set up in the 19th century to house the destitute. By 1930 there were 250 boys and girls in St. Vincent's. In 1931, the Brothers of St. John of God opened Obelisk Park for the care and training of Mentally Handicapped males, and the policy of the Sisters was now directed towards caring mainly for Mentally Handicapped females.

St. Vincent's is a large, old building, in appearance and lay-out conforming to the typical "Work House" as it is popularly known in Ireland. Throughout the 1930's the main efforts of the Sisters were directed towards modifying and adapting St. Vincent's for the special needs of the Mentally Handicapped.

In 1943, again in response to a request from the Archbishop of Dublin, the "Grange," Clonsilla, a small country mansion, situated approximately seven miles from Dublin City, was purchased by the Sisters for conversion into a centre for adult Mentally Handicapped females. It was re-named St. Joseph's, and 43 adults were straight away transferred here from St. Vincent's. Plans for re-modelling the house, and for the provision of additional accommodation were immediately drawn up.

In 1950, the Department of Health offered Glenmaroon — the former residence of the late Sir Ernest Guinness, one of the famous Brewing family — to the Sisters, for use as an institution caring for the Mentally Handicapped. It was decided that the Special School, as recognised by the Department of Education in 1947, which, at this stage was housed in St. Vincent's, Cabra, should be transferred here and developed further. An extensive programme of building and remodelling was put into operation, and in 1956, the new School of Holy Angels, Glenmaroon, was officially opened by His Grace, the Archbishop of Dublin, the Most Rev. Dr. McQuaid.

Limerick, situated approximately 120 miles from Dublin, was the site of the next centre to be acquired by the Sisters. In 1952 a country residence and farm was purchased at Lisnagry, Co. Limerick. There are 40 patients housed here, but plans for extensions are under consideration.

Two years ago, in 1959, perturbed by the length of the waiting list, the Sisters decided to utilise St. Teresa's Home, Blackrock, Co. Dublin, as a Special School. This property belonged to the Order, and up to this time was used as a Home for orphan boys. The necessary alterations to the building are at present being undertaken.

St. Vincent's Home, Cabra, accommodates approximately 500 patients, all of them female except for 30 boys cared for in a separate pavilion. Between 80 and 90 are handicapped to such an extent, that they are confined all the time to bed. The others are split up into divisions of 30, under the control of a Sister, who is assisted by three helpers. Most of these helpers have attended a course in a Vocational School, prior to coming to Cabra, or have experience in elementary nursing. This policy of small working units has necessitated the partitioning of the large rooms of the building, by lowering ceilings, and by the erection of partitions. It has been carried out all through the dormitories and dining halls, as well as in the living and training quarters. The reason behind these small units under the control of one Sister, is to give the child the basic feelings of individuality and security. Towards this end they are encouraged to care for their toys and other possessions, which are carefully selected to be as different as possible from those of their immediate neighbours in the division.

There are two Infirmaries in St. Vincent's, each under the control of a General

Trained nurse with special experience in Mental Handicap. They are assisted by several General Trained nurses, and by some Student nurses from St. Louise's Training School. Most of the sick are treated in one or other Infirmary, but, as in the other institutions in the group, those cases requiring surgical treatment or intensive medical investigation, are referred to outside hospitals with whom a close liaison is maintained. Occupational therapy takes place in each division, and is directed by one of the Sisters who holds a diploma in this subject from Jordan Hill College in Glasgow. Embroidery, Needlework and Rug-making of a very high standard are performed in some of the senior divisions. Dancing sessions take place each morning, and a percussion band is one of the show pieces of St. Vincent's. Each November, a concert is staged by the children, to which their parents and those interested in St. Vincent's are invited. During the year, many treats are organised by the "Friends of St. Vincent's," a visiting lay committee. Their latest project is the building of a seaside holiday home in Portmarnock with accommodation for 40 at a time.

Holy Angels, Glenmaroon, has 250 pupils in residence, most of whom return to their homes for the usual school holiday periods. As in St. Vincent's, the children are divided into units of 30, each one under the care of a single Sister who rapidly becomes familiar with all of the individual problems within her unit. In addition, some 30 day pupils attend the special school. The Sister in charge of this school is a fully qualified teacher, who holds the Diploma in the Teaching of the Mentally Handicapped, from Queene Anne Street, London. Working under her direction are 14 qualified teachers, both lay and religious. Most of the latter hold special diplomas in teaching the handicapped from Queen Anne Street, London, or from Jordan Hill, Glasgow. The other teachers on the staff are attending the newly instituted course for Teachers of the Handicapped, which is at present being run in conjunction with the Department of Education. Home crafts, such as Needlework and Cooking, play an important part in the curriculum, and are regarded as part of the programme for Social Rehabilitation. Towards this end, organised bus tours to factories, beauty places, etc., take place during the school term. Music and dancing classes are conducted by outside teachers who attend several times each week.

Psychometric assessments are made on all new cases by an Educational Psychologist, who holds regular sessions in Holy Angels, as does a Speech Therapist. The emotionally disturbed and maladjusted are seen by the Medical Director for investigation and counselling.

St. Joseph's, Clonsilla, looks after the adults. The patients here suffer from Mental Handicap of a moderate or severe degree. The building is a most modern one — single storey in structure and laid out in separate units. Again, each division is under the care of one Sister. The Infirmary Wing is under the control of a Sister who is a General Trained nurse with special experience in Mental Handicap. Occupational therapy is intensely practised in St. Joseph's, some of the girls engaging in suitable outdoor work on the farm attached to the centre. Only a minority of the patients go home for holidays, so that frequent excursions take place during the year.

In 1959, St. Louise's Training School for Nurses for the Mentally Handicapped was opened in St. Joseph's. There are 34 student nurses training here at the present time, under the supervision of the Sister tutor. Twenty-two of them have already passed the preliminary Examination for State Registered nurses. They are currently studying for their Final examination, which is the requirement for admission to the newly instituted Register of Nurses for the Mentally Handicapped, as laid down by An Bord Altranais, the National Nursing Council. It is expected that 1962 will

see the qualification of the first batch from St. Louise's Training School. All of the theoretical work, and some of the practical work, is carried out in St. Joseph's. For further practical experience, the student nurses take up residence for certain fixed periods in Our Lady's Hospital for Children at Crumlin, St. Vincent's Psychiatric Home, Fairview, as well as at St. Vincent's, Cabra.

St. Teresa's, Blackrock, has 80 resident pupils, with approximately 30 day attenders at the special school. A set-up similar to that of Holy Angels is envisaged here.

Negotiations between the Order and the Department of Health for the re-organisation and the rebuilding of Lisnagry are at present in progress.

### **Internal Organisation**

The finances for this service were originally provided by grants from the Hospital Sweep Stake Funds, augmented by bank borrowing undertaken by the Order. A small portion of the total finances comes from charitable bequests and donations. With the development of the service as outlined, further finance over the years was provided in the same fashion.

Since 1926 the Sisters have undertaken capital commitments in respect of their institutions of approximately £200,000, or 20% of the total involved. The other 80% has been provided by the Government, from the Hospitals' Sweep Stakes, and from other sources. The monies due to the Bank are repaid out of the fee paid in respect of each child by the Local Authority. Since March, 1961, this fee has been increased to £3 - 10 - 0 per week. This, too, is the all-in sum paid weekly by the small number of private patients maintained in the institutions. The amount remaining after Bank repayments is quite small when one considers that current running costs must be met out of this balance. It would be quite impossible to maintain the centres at their present level were the services of the Sisters not given voluntarily.

Each Sister has a short break from her own institution each year. Every day for the remainder of the year, from 5.30 a.m. until 9.30 p.m., their time is divided between their spiritual exercises and the care of their patients. Their whole efforts, undisturbed by outside influences, are concentrated on this work. The care of the Handicapped is complementary to their Spiritual Life, which is conducted in accordance with the principles of Canon Law. Certain Sisters are directed each year to attend Seminars, or Special Courses in Ireland or in Great Britain, in order to keep abreast of the latest developments in this field.

The Sisters work in close liaison with the Department of Health, and with the Department of Education. All proposed capital expenditure must be submitted to the Department of Health for sanction, as must any major changes in policy. Within these limits, the internal administration of each house is controlled by the Sister in Charge, who is responsible to her religious superiors. She deals with all matters of finance, with the appointment of personnel, with any reconstruction or building work, and with the everyday running of the institution. In addition she has a responsibility to the Community under her care, in relation to whom she acts as a Mother.

The Medical side of the service is directed by a Psychiatrist with special experience in Mental Handicap. He is not directly concerned with administration problems, and can consequently devote all of his time to assessment, counselling, the physical care of the patients, as well as lecturing to the student nurses and teachers. Assisting him in a part-time capacity in this work, is another doctor with special

experience in mental handicap, who is responsible, in addition, for the emergency work arising out of St. Vincent's, Holy Angels and St. Joseph's.

### **Concluding Remarks**

A pleasing feature of our recent economic development, is the availability of many more jobs in Eire than hitherto. This has meant that the opportunities for employment in suitable jobs have improved for the Mentally Handicapped. At the moment, the Sisters are concerned with Job Placement, and with the provision of some form of After Care supervision. Towards this end, a closer liaison with the National Rehabilitation Organisation is envisaged.

All over the civilised world, new concepts for dealing with the Mentally Handicapped are being formulated. Here in Ireland, in common with other workers in this field, the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent De Paul are very conscious of these new, dynamic developments. They are most anxious to adopt any new ideas which will advance their work for the Mentally Handicapped. The whole basis of their efforts in this sphere is founded, broadly speaking, on their realisation of the essential dignity of a human being. Any further advances must be made on that basis.