

THE PROBLEM OF THE FEEBLE-MINDED IN SOUTH AFRICA*

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To make more clear to you the general position in South Africa as it affects the subject of Mental Disorders and Defects, I propose, if you will allow me, to begin my paper by referring briefly to matters outside its scope as indicated by the title.

Before the Union of the Colonies, we had a most excellent Act in force in Cape Colony, passed in 1897. It was taken over practically in its entirety by the Governments of the Transvaal and Free State in 1902 or thereabouts.

When the Union took place in 1910, the enactments in force in each Colony, which had now become a Province in the Union, continued to operate, and the need for a consolidating law very soon became apparent, to secure uniformity of procedure, to facilitate the transfer of patients from one Institution to another, and to bring all the laws into line with modern legislation, particularly regarding the care and treatment of the feeble-minded.

There were other urgent needs, the most important of which was the necessity for more accommodation for patients. For many years previous to the Union, practically no additional accommodation had been provided in Cape Colony. Indeed, it was only in the Transvaal and the Free State that there were beds to spare, but after the Union these were practically immediately filled up by the transfer of patients from the other Provinces. Thus the position became really serious, and patients urgently needing mental hospital treatment were kept in gaols and other unsuitable places for lengthy periods until hospital beds could be allotted to them.

The Government fully realized the difficulties of the position, and in April, 1913, appointed a select Committee of the House of Assembly to enquire into the question and make recommendations. That Committee reported in May, 1913, and their report was the most important that had ever been made in South Africa upon this subject and gave us a fresh start, not only in providing accommodation for mentally afflicted patients, but also in further developing a healthy and keen public interest. Besides recommending that funds should be provided to relieve

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