

## *Using a 'Portakabin' to gain space in a general practice*

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**SUMMARY.** The problem of extra space needed for a general practice has been temporarily solved by the use of a 'Portakabin'. While orthodox building methods are so frustratingly expensive, we must consider unconventional methods which allow us to gain space relatively quickly.

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### **Introduction**

Although forced through circumstances to work from two buildings, our eight-man National Health Service group practice has nevertheless had a continual struggle for space. One of the buildings, Muirhouse, the base for five partners, set in the centre of a growing housing estate, has been a particular problem. Building programmes have been necessary there from 1948 onwards at three to five-year intervals. The most recent demand for more space has come not so much from more patients, but from the growing involvement of nurses, health visitors, and secretaries in the practice.

#### *Need for expansion*

The previous extension to the premises in 1969 provided a minimum of four consulting rooms, two examination rooms, a nurse's treatment room, a health visitor's room with a reception area, and a secretary's room. In 1972 it became apparent that:

(1) The reception area was not big enough for the increasing bulk of records, in spite of numerous interim arrangements, such as shelves placed in window spaces. No room was available for additional records such as those for developmental paediatrics and other special interests.

(2) The secretarial room became inadequate to cope with the increased audio-typing, as the partners had found the use of small tape recorders an important aid to legible record keeping and inter-professional communication.

(3) The floor space for special sessions such as well-baby clinics was inadequate.

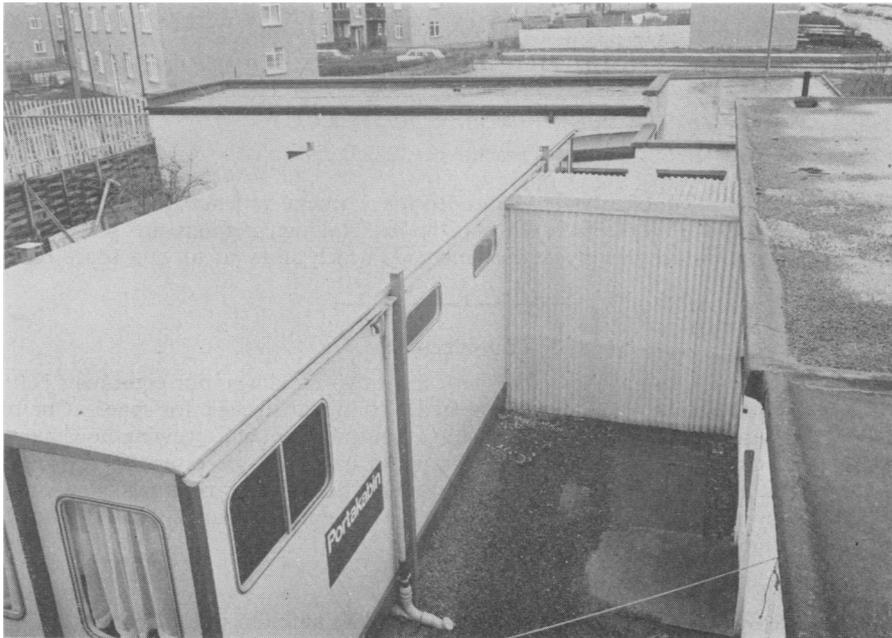
(4) In spite of having staggered appointments to achieve the most satisfactory spread for the use of staff and space (only two doctors consulting at any one time, except Saturday mornings), the scope of the nurse's work was hindered because of her cramped working area and the small waiting space available for her patients.

(5) The need for an additional partner was clearly apparent if the consulting sessions available to the patients were to be adequate and the appointment system was not to deteriorate into an appointment to queue. This meant a fifth consulting room, as dovetailing additional two-hourly sessions twice daily into the existing consulting space would mean endless leap-frogging from one room to another, with the resulting confusion for patients and impediment to a smooth flow through the building.

It was therefore decided to increase the floor area available by one eighth and add to the existing building, three rooms plus a W.C. At the same time, the internal arrangement of the building could be re-arranged. Planning permission was obtained in October 1972 followed by three competitive estimates.

The quantity surveyor reported in June 1972 that the estimated cost for the alterations was about £6,000 plus fittings and equipment. For the gain of three additional rooms of modest size and a W.C. it was an acceptable though expensive exercise.

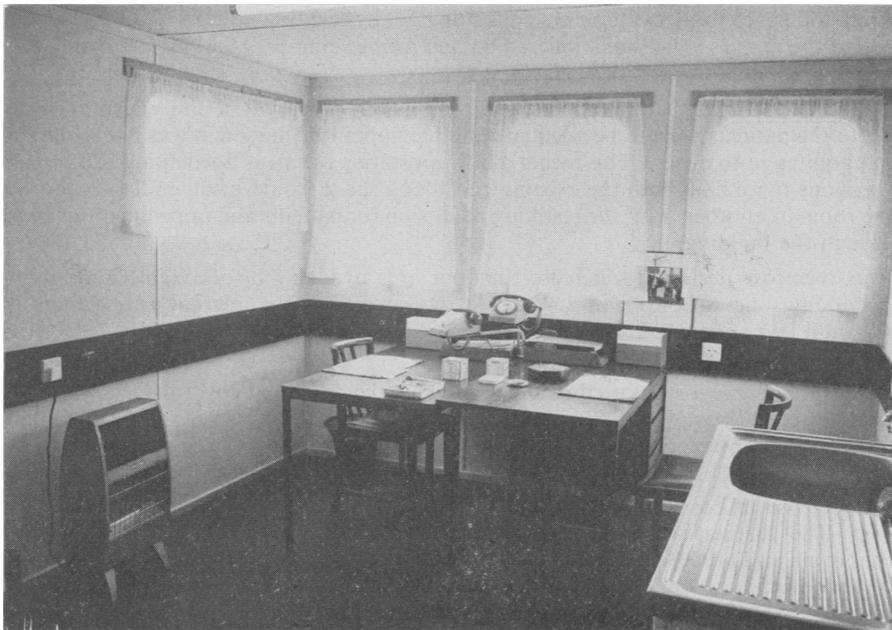
At the beginning of December 1972 the lowest tender received was £12,800. The explanation given for increase in cost was the increase in builders' wages and the increased cost of raw materials. The partners were not prepared to accept this expenditure for about £4,000 per additional room and proceeded to look for an alternative way to achieve the extra space. A close study of unconventional building methods produced a solution.



#### **'Portakabin'**

A 'Portakabin,' used as an extension, was slung by mobile crane into the garden. This linked to the existing building by a plastic-lined corridor, with some of the internal alterations proposed in the earlier plan, and allowed us to achieve the minimum need for a total just over £6,000. The total cost of the operation connected with the 'Portakabin' and the link-corridor accounted for only one third of this sum.

The speed of the operation combined with the alterations in the main building compared favourably with traditional building methods. The 'Portakabin' is pleasant and reasonably sound-proof. Contrary to our fears, heating and ventilation problems are minimal, and condensation



is non-existent. Planning permission was reasonably prompt, as was acceptance for an improvement grant under the National Health Service regulations.

However, the planning permission does have the rider that by 1978 the fabric of the 'Portakabin' will have to be reviewed. We might then have to face extensive demands for repairs from the local authority, but having used the cabin in its present setting for nearly six months we are confident that it will last as well as most post-war buildings, and certainly long enough for the tentative health-centre plans in our district to mature.

Although we had to reduce our demands for an extra waiting area, for an additional W.C. and for a staff rest area, we have clearly achieved an operational equilibrium with the existing additional space which should see us through the next few years.

#### **Addendum**

Since this was written in March 1974 the partners found it necessary, after one partner retired, to revert to seven partners in order to finance the practice and staff because of the falling real value of the general practitioners' remuneration.

The 'Portakabin' has lasted excellently and the additional consulting room is being fully used as an additional treatment room for the nurses.

KENSINGTON, CHELSEA AND WESTMINSTER AHA(T)

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## **3 Year Vocational Training Scheme for General Practice**

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The first year consists of senior house officer appointments in PAEDIATRICS and GENERAL MEDICINE, followed by a second year in GERIATRICS and ACCIDENT AND EMERGENCY. The third year will be spent in a selected general practice in the North or West London area.

Throughout the three years there will be a WEEKLY HALF-DAY RELEASE

COURSE in GENERAL PRACTICE SUBJECTS and in the third year an additional full day in PSYCHIATRY.

**THE SCHEME HAS BEEN APPROVED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SECURITY AND THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF GENERAL PRACTITIONERS.**

*Application forms and further details may be obtained from the Hospital Secretary (telephone 01-969 2488 extension 343), to whom the applications should be returned by 11th April 1975.*