

# Correspondence

## The earliest cottage hospital

Sir,

In the correspondence columns of the *Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners* (Vol. 21 No 107 June 1971) Dr Clayton Payne suggests that Teignmouth Hospital antedates Cranleigh Cottage Hospital by seven years. It indeed does so.

That Cranleigh Cottage Hospital established by Dr Albert Napper in 1958 can nevertheless claim justly to be the first *cottage* hospital in Surrey and Great Britain is still true because Dr Clayton Payne's synopsis of the foundation of Teignmouth and Dawlish Dispensary and Marine Infirmary describes a different invention.

The whole point of the first cottage hospitals which sprang up after Dr Napper's innovation, a total of 16 appearing within seven years, consists in these small hospitals literally being cottages in order to persuade patients to come under medical and nursing care in the community within which they lived. Hospitals and infirmaries already existed, staffed outside the teaching hospitals almost entirely by general-practitioner surgeons, general-practitioner physicians, and the early sub specialities, but the day of the whole-time specialist had not dawned to any extent outside our greatest cities.

The mortality and morbidity in infirmaries and district hospitals was so high that "terror of 'ospitals'" was a real fear among the sick poor. The larger hospitals were in towns distant from their villages. Travel was difficult or impossible. The cottage hospital was, it was hoped, identical to the homes from which the patients were drawn, differing only in cleanliness, warmth, proper hygiene and absence of overcrowding.

They were recommended to have six beds as the optimum number and were sited in villages or very small towns. The complete picture of cottage and village hospitals can be read in Burdett's *Cottage hospitals, A handy book of cottage hospitals* by Horace Swete, M.D. (1870) and *On state medicine in Great Britain and Ireland* by Harry W. Rumsay, M.D., F.R.S. (1867) in addition to the account of the evolution of cottage hospitals in R. M. S. McConaghey's work. There was no intention in the plan to treat outpatients on a charitable basis in a Dispensary associated with the unit.

Here in Reigate a cottage hospital was founded on 1 September, 1866 by John Walters, M.B., on the lines recommended by Albert Napper whom

he knew. The Reigate self-supporting dispensary was inaugurated in 1861 by John Walters' predecessors. It was not sited in a particular building but was a contributory scheme of one penny per week, all the Reigate doctors participating from the three practices of that time. Medicine, and attendance at home or at surgery were not subject to further change.

The Reigate Cottage Hospital grew rapidly because it was not sited in a village. By 1869 it was necessary to build and move to Redhill. The minute books from its inception reveal that a sole honorary medical officer, John Walters was appointed. By 1867 the rules were altered and it was open to all local general practitioners with the proviso that their work must be "in conjunction with The Medical Officer". This continued until the number of designated honorary medical officers had increased to six in 1897 when the staff was 'closed' and the 'open' nature of the institution ceased. At that time 16 doctors were named and thanked for their services. Its name changed from Reigate Cottage Hospital 1866 to Reigate and Redhill Cottage Hospital in 1869-70. Reigate and Redhill Hospital in 1908, and East Surrey Hospital in 1923. It had ceased to be a cottage hospital, in fact but not in name, in June 1971 when it had a complement of 12 beds in a purpose-built establishment. Your editorial comment also suggests that charges made to patients remove a hospital from the title of cottage hospital, but the committee of the hospital in 1868 records "they desire, however, to re-affirm the principle of weekly payments by the patients themselves. Experience confirms their opinion that its adoption tends both to the popularity and success of the institution."

Indeed we have here at a very early stage the concept of a contributory ingredient in cottage hospitals, while the designated and appointed Honorary Medical Officer was an early instance of the concept of an honorary medical superintendent.

Nevertheless I do not think Teignmouth Hospital started as a cottage hospital in the strict sense of the title, while the Reigate Cottage Hospital, though so named for 42 years ceased to be so in 1870. Cranleigh Cottage Hospital was a specific invention of Dr Albert Napper's and in my opinion still has the honour to be the first.

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