Psychiatric museum seeks asylum

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Inside the Porirua Psychiatric Museum which may be closing.

The roof is leaking, the darkened wards stink of mould but should anyone care that a former mental asylum is going to rack and ruin?

The Porirua Hospital Museum houses a collection that tracks more than 150 years of mental health services in New Zealand - irreplaceable artefacts now under threat. The Capital & Coast District Health Board is reviewing the future of the museum, with ageing trust board members and a lack of money leaving it struggling.

Meanwhile, a tour of the museum is a chilling experience.

Scary medical devices sit in glass cabinets, while a skeleton leers from a cupboard. There is a seclusion room with a straitjacket hanging at the ready and a dentist's surgery where rows of teeth were routinely taken out.

"We never had a padded cell, which is what some people had, but if a person who was very unwell needed to be kept in a safe place, it was here," said Helen Bichan, Porirua Hospital's former medical superintendent.

The straitjacket was used rarely, she added.

Health board member Margaret Faulkner, also a museum trustee, said public opinion was divided on the hospital's history.

"There are some people who would think it a good day if we close the doors, who think people were mistreated. But you've got to remember there weren't a lot of treatments to keep people manageable then . . . and this place did provide a lot of good for a whole lot of people."

"The history of any community has the good and the bad in it, and Porirua Hospital is part of the community."

It was important to remember the mistakes of the past, she said. The museum was also used as a resource centre for medical students and doctors, and was the only one of its kind in the country.

Ms Bichan worked at the hospital for nearly 20 years from 1969 and is a founding member of the museum trust board.

When Ms Bichan worked there, the hospital had at least 1600 residents, a third of whom were elderly patients, and was one of Porirua's main employers.

Mental illness was not well understood and people were often signed into the hospital by GPs unsure how to deal with them. Ms Bichan remembers a doctor telling one family that it was "better to put your daughter in an institution and don't upset her by visiting".

The parents of another resident rang Ms Bichan to say they were organising their will and wanted to ensure she would never tell the resident's siblings they had an intellectually disabled sister.

"If we think of the alternatives for people who were cared for in this place over the years, they were pretty awful."
The hospital was originally established by the Government Lunacy Department in 1887 as the Porirua Lunatic Asylum.

It was renamed Porirua Mental Hospital in the early 1900s and then Porirua Hospital in the 1970s, when it came under the control of the Wellington Hospital Board.

Policies at that time to resettle long-stay patients into the community started the long process of winding the hospital down.

The museum was opened in F ward in 1987 and is classified as a historic building.

The district health board review will look at the museum's siting and governance.

The museum is open on Tuesdays, 1pm to 4pm.

Nurses' accounts mixed on institution's history

The former mental health asylum, built in 1910, has a sordid past. Back in the early days, mental illness was not well understood and many treatments were experimental.

A nurse who worked at the hospital in 1925 remembered, "The patients in F Ward were terribly violent. They screamed and yelled all night and half the day.

"There were no drugs. They were locked in single rooms and you couldn't go near them."

But another nurse there in the 1930s said, "It was not really barbaric. They were not shut in and forgotten; they were moved to a clean room every 12 hours. There was no medication, there was nothing else we could do."

In 1932, the hospital began insulin coma treatment, where insulin was injected to induce a coma that would supposedly cure schizophrenia.

Electroconvulsive therapy was given at the hospital from the 1940s, initially without anaesthetic.

The success rate was not known, but records from nurses who worked there at the time tell of people being lifted from depression and roused from their catatonic states to talk again.

Several people have since filed claims against Porirua Hospital for abuse, with the Government receiving 401 claims of abuse or mistreatment from people who were in psychiatric care nationwide before the May 1993 compensation cut-off date.

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