

HISTORICAL FACTSHEET No 11

The Typhoid Outbreak of 1948

On 8 September 1948, the hospital physician had under his care 12 members of the nursing staff and two patients. They had become ill during the previous three days with symptoms suggestive of influenza. However, after laboratory investigation a diagnosis of typhoid fever was confirmed. By 15 September, 43 suspected cases had been removed to isolation hospitals. The outbreak continued until the end of October, by which time 116 clinical cases of typhoid fever had been diagnosed. Most of those affected were staff, but there were also 32 patient cases. No-one from the local population was affected.

The Ministry of Health carried out extensive investigations into the cause of the outbreak, but results were inconclusive. It may have been that the hospital fire seven months earlier was a contributory factor, as there had been considerable disorganisation since that time, with a great deal of building work going on. The drainage and sewage system and the water supply were all thoroughly investigated. By far the greater number of cases occurred in staff eating in the Nurses' Home, and strong circumstantial evidence emerged in favour of a milk-borne infection. However, as with the fire, it proved very difficult to attribute a definite cause to the outbreak.

The staff affected by the epidemic included day and night nurses, both resident and non-resident domestic staff, a number of workmen, and administrative staff including John Menzies, Secretary-Superintendent (the chief hospital administrator). Sadly, there were seven staff deaths: a domestic assistant, a boilerman, an engineer's labourer, and four members of the nursing and physiotherapy staff. Their names were subsequently recorded on a memorial board and placed in the Goodford Memorial Chapel at the hospital.

Two main factors were recognised as helping to limit the extent of the epidemic: the high standard of barrier nursing carried out by the hospital's nursing staff, and the immediate transfer of diagnosed cases to isolation hospitals. The investigating team paid particular tribute to the 'sanitary technique of the staff' which led to very few secondary cases among hospital patients.

Sources

1. *The Heritage of Oswestry: the origin and development of the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital, Oswestry 1900-1975. 3rd ed. Oswestry: The Hospital, 1975, p 91-4*
2. *Bradley, WH, Wilson Evans, I, Taylor, I. A hospital outbreak of typhoid fever. Journal of Hygiene Vol 49 1951, p 325-34*