

(No. 81.)

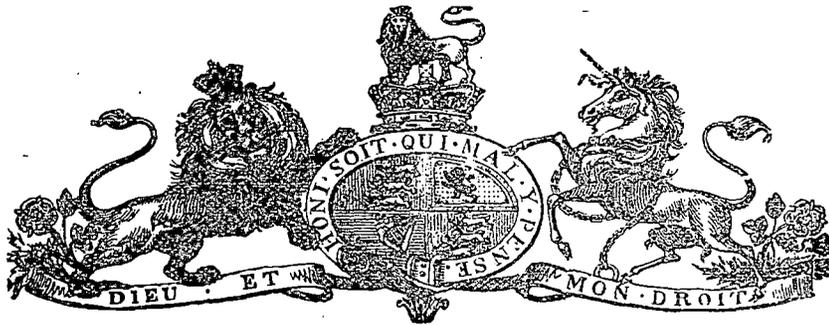


1891.

PARLIAMENT OF TASMANIA.

OUTBREAK OF DIPHTHERIA AT SNUG RIVER.

Presented to both Houses of Parliament by His Excellency's Command.



OUTBREAK OF DIPHTHERIA AT SNUG RIVER, IN THE HEALTH DISTRICT OF KINGSTON.

To the Honourable the President and the Members of the Central Board of Health.

GENTLEMEN,

1. I HAVE the honour to report that, in accordance with the instructions contained in Minute No. 125, 1890, I have made all the inquiries in my power into the circumstances attending the outbreak of diphtheria at Snug River, and the following is the information I have been enabled to obtain.

2. The disease appears to have been confined to one family named Hart, all the members of which, with, perhaps, the exception of Mr. Hart, the father, seem to have suffered more or less from throat affection. The first case of diphtheria was that of Mary Hart, aged 15, who became ill in the first week in August, and has now completely recovered. The next case was that of Maria Jane Hart, 17, who was treated in the Hobart Hospital, and who died on the 13th September: then followed Tasman Hart, 6, who had the disease in a very mild form; Albert Hart, 14, who was sent to the Hospital, and Thomas Hart, 27, who have all recovered. Joseph Hart, 16, next took the disease, and was also sent to Hobart Hospital, but fretted so there that his parents took him home, where he now is apparently convalescent. Denis John Hart, the seventh case, is now a patient in the Hospital. Mrs. Hart says that she also suffered a little from sore throat.

3. The Hart family occupy a new house built on the site of an old one. When I visited it on the 8th instant, it and the adjoining yard were in fair condition. When the Local Inspector, Supt. Stuart, of Kingston, visited it in consequence of the first notification of diphtheria, he found matters not so satisfactory, but under his directions the sanitary condition of the place was ameliorated. No doubt the house formerly on the site was without proper drainage, and consequently the whole site is probably to some extent impregnated with the slops thrown down by former occupiers. Still, an isolated house, standing on a slight bank at a little distance from the Snug River, does not appear a place for a new and independent outbreak of diphtheria. The following facts point to another source for the origin of the outbreak.

4. On the 30th July last, a boy named John Turnbull, aged 7, died of diphtheria at the Hobart Hospital. His parents, who live at Three Hut Point, in the district of the Gordon Local Board of Health, took his body from the Hospital the next day and brought it to the house of a relative, Mr. Jarvis, who lives on the hill side near Mr. Hart's. The body was kept all night at Mr. Jarvis's, and during the evening two of the Misses Hart visited the house, and stayed about two hours in the same room as the coffin. The surviving Miss Hart says that she noticed an offensive odour seemingly coming from the coffin, and a few days after she became ill with diphtheria. During the same evening other neighbours also came in, but no case of diphtheria occurred among them. A grandniece of Mrs. Jarvis, who stays in the house, was for a great part

of the evening close by the coffin, but has escaped all infection. The parents of John Turnbull have, I was informed, a large family, but none of the other children have been affected. But taking all the circumstances into consideration, there does not seem to be much room for doubt that the Hart family contracted the disease during this visit to the room in which the dead boy was lying, being probably the only visitors in a receptive condition, or having predisposition for the disease.

5. The following are, as far as I could learn, the circumstances attending the removal of John Turnbull's body to Mr. Jarvis's house. Mr. Turnbull appears to have asked Mr. Fisher, the driver of the Brown's River coach, to take the coffin containing the body in the coach. Mr. Fisher declined, although he says that he was not informed that the boy had died of diphtheria or any other infectious disease. Mr. Fisher, however, arranged with Mr. Oliver, a cab proprietor, to take the coffin to Kingston. Mr. Oliver says that neither by Mr. Fisher nor by the people at the Hospital was he informed that the body was that of a person who had died of an infectious disease, so he did not take any precautions, though he has subsequently had his cab painted and relined. At Kingston the coffin was transferred to a chaise cart belonging to Mr. Fisher and taken in it to Mr. Jarvis's. This chaise cart was not specially-disinfected. Mr. Jarvis was not informed that the boy had died of any infectious disease, and consequently took no precautions.

6. In their way the whole of these proceedings seem to be just those most calculated to spread the infection of the deadly disease. It is therefore much to be regretted that in this case the person who appears to be most to blame appears also to be out of the reach of the law. The 16th Sect. of the Public Health Act, 1887, relates only to the exposure of the dead in public places, and not in private houses. The 21st and 22nd Bye-laws of the Kingston Local Board only refer to living infected persons; and the language of the 24th, 25th, and 26th Bye-laws evidently presupposes that the death has occurred in the house in which the dead body is lying. The case, like this, of a body of a person who has died of an infectious disease being brought into a district, does not seem to be provided for, if the body is not "retained" some time in the house. No doubt that under the 25th or 26th Bye-law Mr. Jarvis might be proceeded against, but he already seems to be more sinned against than sinning, as he was kept in the dark as to the nature of the disease from which the boy had died; so it would be hardly fair to punish him when the real offender gets off scot free.

7. The Local Board of Health of Kingston was quite ignorant of what had taken place until it received from this office on the 21st of October the notification of the reception of Albert Hart at the Hospital. Its Inspector, Mr. Stuart, during his inspection heard what had occurred at Mr. Jarvis's in connection with John Turnbull's body, and reported to his Board, and Mr. Lucas, its Chairman, at once communicated with this Board. Mr. Lucas's letter, dated 27th October, was forwarded to the Hospital, with a request for information as to what precautions had been taken before the removal of the boy's body. Dr. Payne replied:—"Beyond the body being washed with disinfectant, I am not aware that any other steps were taken. The boy, Turnbull, died on July 30th, but I do not know when the corpse arrived at the Snug River, nor the means of conveyance. I believe the coffin was opened and a 'wake' was held, and in my opinion the outbreak of diphtheria in the Hart family was owing to this ignorant and repulsive custom." This last statement is made in error; the Jarvis family is a Protestant one; no wake was held, and I was assured that the coffin was not opened. I do not know whether Dr. Payne was acquainted with the arrangement that had been made with the Hospital Board with respect to the precautions to be taken before allowing the removal of the body of any patient who had died of an infectious disease. I beg to append copies of the correspondence that took place when the arrangement was made.

8. With respect to the measures to be taken to prevent the recurrence of such proceedings as have taken place at the Snug River, I would recommend:—

- 1st. That the 16th Section of the Public Health Act, 1887, be amended by enacting that the penalty provided by the Section shall be recoverable from any person bringing into the district of any Local Board, without previously informing such Local Board, the body of a person who has died of any infectious disease.
- 2nd. That the 21st and 22nd Bye-laws of the Kingston Local Board of Health be amended so as to include the precautions to be taken in regard to the dead as well as the living. That the first line of the 24th Bye-law shall be amended so as to read:—"The occupier of any house in which there is the body of any person who shall." That all other Local Boards be requested to adopt such amended Bye-laws.
- 3rd. That the Board of Management of the Hobart Hospital be requested to revert to the arrangement made in Dr. Smart's letter of the 11th February, 1888. That it be further requested to immediately inform the Central Board when any body of a patient who has died of an infectious disease is removed or about to be removed from the Hospital, with particulars as to the destination and mode of conveyance, on the understanding that the Central Board will thereupon communicate with the Local Boards interested, so that proper precautions may be taken.

9. As regards the present condition of things at Mr. Hart's, it has been already mentioned that Joseph Hart, who is just recovering from the disease, is at home. As Miss Hart is acting as Postmistress (she has now quite recovered), I have arranged that she should be entirely separated from the rest of the family, and have no communication with them, living and sleeping in the separate building used as a Post Office, but having her food supplied to her; that the whole of the incoming and outgoing mails should be thoroughly fumigated with sulphur (I understand that there are proper facilities for doing this, and that it has already been done for some time.) If these arrangements are not properly carried out, I should recommend that the postal business of the district be, temporarily at least, carried on elsewhere.

I have the honour to remain,
Mr. President and Gentlemen,
Your faithful Servant,

A. MAULT, *Engineering Inspector and Secretary.*

*Central Board of Health, Hobart,
11th December, 1890.*

APPENDIX.

EXTRACT from Letter dated 28th January, 1888, from the Secretary of the Central Board of Health to the Chairman of the Board of Management to the General Hospital, Hobart.

"IN regard to the burial of the bodies of those who die of infectious diseases, a penalty is imposed by the 16th Section of the Public Health Act, 1887, (the amendment Act), upon any person in charge of such a body who exposes, or permits it to be exposed, in a public place without taking reasonable precautions for its disinfection. The Central Board of Health therefore trusts that your Board will not allow any such body to be taken from your Hospital until the body has been disinfected as directed on page 47 of the 'Instructions' (a copy of which I enclose), or in other manner as your medical officers may direct."

[*Copy of Directions on page 47 of "Instructions."*]

Disinfection of the Dead Body.

When a person dies of any infectious disease, the body should be enveloped in a sheet saturated with a solution of carbolic acid or chlorinated lime, and placed in the coffin as soon as possible, and covered with quicklime or fresh charcoal.

COPY of reply of the Chairman of the Hospital Board.

General Hospital, Hobart, 11th February, 1888.

SIR,

I BEG to inform you that your letter of 28th January, with enclosures, &c., was submitted to the Board of Management on Friday last, the 10th inst., when it was decided that instructions be given to the House Surgeon to see that these Instructions and recommendations be carried out.

I have the honour to be,
Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

(Signed) THOS. C. SMART, *Chairman of the Board.*

A. MAULT, *Esq., Secretary Central Board of Health.*