

Historical note

The centenary of Ivy Cottage, Belfast City Hospital

J K Houston, J F O'Sullivan

Accepted 19 January 1993.

Pregnant women have been delivered in the Belfast City Hospital since 1842. These first patients were destitute inmates of the Workhouse. Over a number of years many reports of maternal deaths due to puerperal sepsis had been presented to the Board of Governors. At a meeting in August 1892 the members agreed to build a new hospital for maternity patients. This unit consisted of three wards, each containing ten beds, two rooms for resident nurses, a kitchen and "all necessary accommodation". The hospital, named Ivy Cottage, was opened in May 1893.¹

Dr Robert Hall, Visiting Medical Officer, urged the Guardians to employ nursing staff exclusively for the new hospital. This was agreed. The unit was staffed by one sister and two nurses — one for day duty and one for night duty. Sister Douglas was appointed at a salary of £26.00 annually until her retirement in 1933 at the age of 72 years. She then lived with many other retired nurses in Gardner Robb Hospital until her death in 1948.

Few records of the work of the unit are available. The earliest report to the Guardians included the period from September 1898 — September 1890, during which time 251 patients had been delivered. There were three maternal deaths, five stillbirths and three infant deaths. One patient had several eclamptic fits. After delivery, mothers were carried in a 'stretcher' of blankets to the convalescent wards.

When Jubilee Maternity Hospital opened in 1935, Ivy Cottage was converted into a 'septic ward' (Jubilee IV) in which all women with puerperal sepsis were nursed. The number of beds was reduced to 20. The Sister in charge, Miss A Harron, was paid £75.00 annually. During 1945, there was a serious outbreak of gastroenteritis among the babies in the Jubilee Hospital so the entire hospital was closed and all the patients transferred to Purdysburn Fever Hospital. In that year, Dr Muriel Frazer was appointed to the staff as a Visiting Medical Officer to help with the increased clinical work.

In 1948, Jubilee IV (the old Ivy Cottage) re-opened as a neonatal unit. It now contained an operating theatre, various nurseries and facilities for mothers to remain with their sick babies. In 1958 it was designated as the Regional Surgical Neonatal Unit for Northern Ireland. Dr Frazer remained, unassisted, in charge of the unit until her retirement in 1976.

Jubilee Maternity Hospital, Belfast BT9 7AB.

J K Houston, MD, FRCOG, Consultant Obstetrician.

J F O'Sullivan, MB, FRCS, FRCOG, Consultant Obstetrician.



Ivy Cottage (now Jubilee Hospital neonatal nursery). Photograph taken in 1930 when it was the maternity hospital.

In 1977, the neonatal unit was once more re-organised with more modern facilities for intensive care, special care and intermediate care of both premature and sick infants. Prior to that time, premature babies had been cared for in another part of the hospital. Dr M Reid was appointed as Consultant Neonatologist. He was later joined by two colleagues, Drs G McClure and H Halliday, all three doctors also sharing duties in the nursery at the Royal Maternity Hospital. In 1978, the unit was named 'The Muriel J Frazer Neonatal Unit' in honour of its first neonatologist.

Approximately 25% of babies admitted to the nursery are referred from other hospitals. In 1984, the neonatal death rate was 6.3 per 1,000 — the lowest ever recorded in this hospital. With improved facilities becoming available, a further reduction in the neonatal death rate is anticipated.

REFERENCE

1. Houston JK, O'Sullivan JF. Midwifery in the Belfast City Hospital, Northern Ireland, 1842 – 1985. Published privately, copy deposited in the Medical Library, The Queen's University of Belfast.