

Ref CSO 22/88/1859

Letters which preceded the Board of Enquiry
John Clark M.D. to the Colonial Secretary

*H.M.'s Office
22 September 1843*

Sir,

I have the honor to report my having inspected the Female Convict Ship "East London", of which Mr. Caldwell R.N. was the Surgeon Superintendent.

It sailed from Kingston on the 10th. of May with 133 females convicts and 49 children. After missing the Cape of Good Hope, sickness appeared and no less than 19 fatal cases among the women and 12 among the children have occurred. Every care on the part of the Surgeon Superintendent and the Captain seems to have been afforded:- still, I consider it advisable on many accounts that I may be authorized by His Excellency to appoint a Medical Board to inquire into and report on the causes of this unprecedented mortality. Twelve sick have been ordered into the Colonial Hospital.

*I have the honor to be
Sir
Your very obedient servant
John M. Clark M.D.
D.M.O.*

The Colonial Secretary.

Letter from W. Dermer M.D. Colonial Assistant Secretary to
J. Clark Esq. M.D. Deputy Inspector General of Hospitals

*Nursery Hobart Town.
2nd. October 1843.*

Sir

In answer to your queries respecting the mortality of the children who accompanied their mothers to this Colony. I beg to state that they generally landed in a sickly state, so much so, that one half generally dies, and I attribute it to the women having salt provisions during the long voyage which renders the milk not sufficiently nutritious and also from the reckless state of their minds, which renders them careless about everything connected with their offspring.

I give this opinion after nearly six years experience as the Medical Officer in charge of this Establishment during which time a great number of children from ships have come under my care, under five years of age.

*I have ????
W. Dermer M. D.
Col. Asst. Surgeon.*

*J. Clark Esq. M.D.
Dit. Inspt. General
of Hospitals.*

THE BOARD OF ENQUIRY

Hobart Town
5th. October 1843

In accordance with an order of the Principal Medical Officer bearing date 30 September 1843 that a Board of Medical Officers should assemble composed of -----

*Andrew Sinclair Esq.
Surgeon R. N. President.
William Sercomb Esq.
Col. Assistant Surgeon.
Brook T. Townsend Esq.
Staff Asst. Surgeon. Members.*

.to investigate into and report as to the causes that have led to the great mortality of the women and children on board the Female Convict Ship "East London" during the voyage from Dublin to Van Diemen's Land.

The Board having assembled on the 3rd., 4th., and 5th. October instant and having laid before them the necessary documents and heard such testimony as was deemed requisite, and of the opinion that the mortality on board has arisen in the greater number of cases from Scorbutic diseases and from having been 133 days on the passage and during that time on salt provisions and no deaths during the first 66 days shews that the common cause of scurvy having been in this case more than usually active.

The principal of these causes have arisen from want of Nourishment produced by the prisoners obstinately refusing Pea Soup, Cocoa, Tea, Pudding and Lime Juice during the first part of the voyage particularly. Another cause existed in the filthy habits of the prisoners themselves. Although the decks were cleaned thoroughly during the day and the use of the swinging stoves had recourse to yet they were in the habit of soiling the decks by depositing their faeces and urine over them during the night in spite of every attempt made to prevent it and from spilling water after their being locked up at night their berths as well as the decks were consequently always found in that wet state in the mornings.

The berths abutt the main hatchway and those near the water closets appear to have been the principal seats of the cases that terminated fatally. It appears also that from the Prisoners becoming more reconciled to the Government Diet, that during the last part of the voyage, mortality became less.

The Boardthat from the State of Sickness existing amongst the Prisoners on coming within sight of the Cape of Good Hope and nine deaths having taken place within the previous three weeks that the Surgeon Superintendant did not deem it advisable to put into that port for refreshments.

The Board are of opinion that the Surgeon Superintendant and the Captain of the Ship throughout the entire voyage made use of every other means to arrest the progress of disease and alleviate the condition of the prisoners.

Signed

*Andrew Sinclair Esq., Surgeon R.N
William Sercomb Esq., Col. Asst. Surgeon.
Brook T. Townsend Esq.,
Staff Assistant Surgeon.*

Dept. Inspt. General of Hospitals.

The Report of the Medical Board of Enquiry to the Colonial Secretary, Van Diemen's Land

Principal Medical Officer's Office.
9th. October 1843

Sir

I have the honour to forward for the information of His Excellency the report of the Proceedings of a Board of Medical Officers held at my request for the purpose of investigating the causes that have led to the great mortality of women and children on Board the Female Convict Ship "East London" during the voyage from Dublin to the Colony, of which ship Mr. Caldwell was the Surgeon Superintendent.

It becomes my duty to make some observations in this report ---Scurvy on board female convict ships is an unusual disease, greater personal cleanliness, more liberty of exercise on board ship and less anxiety respecting their future term of probation in the Colony perhaps, as principal causes, which give them protection from this disease which male convicts do not generally possess. The fact, however, is certain, whatever be its cause.

The Board are of opinion that the chief cause of the scurvy was want of nourishment, "the prisoners refusing Pea Soup, Cocoa, Pea Pudding, during the first part of the voyage particularly. It appears therefore that the diet consisted principally of salt pork 1/3lb. daily and ship biscuit; if this be the case no wonder that fatal disease sprung up.

No mention is made in the Report, what, if any medical comforts were given by the Surgeon Superintendent, nor have they commented on the fact that other females in convict ships have arrived from Ireland after equally tedious voyages without suffering from this disease; and who have never refused Tea, Cocoa, Pea Soup, etc. I believe the fact is and it ought to have been reported that a majority of these convicts of the "East London" were from districts in Ireland where these articles of diet are unknown and consequently rejected when offered. They would willingly have exchanged them for their favourite Oatmeal with a little salt butter potatoes, which during the early part of the voyage could be supplied or perhaps boiled rice. --it appears to me absolutely necessary in future to adopt a scale of diet more in accordance with the habits and wants of this particular class of convicts. The present one may suit English or Irish females accustomed to English manners but apply it to convicts from Galway or many other counties of Ireland, I believe the results will prove as disastrous as in the present case. Another cause of disaster in the opinion of the Board, "existed in the filthy habits of the Prisoners". It is difficult to preserve cleanliness on board an Irish Convict Ship. Still, I cannot but think that if a strict and stern discipline was in the first instance of this shameful violation of decency, they would not have prevailed as it seems they did throughout the voyage.

The Board, among some faults of omission, have suggested what appears contrary to evidence.

Jlms. say " that from the Prisoners becoming more reconciled to the Govt. diet during the last part of the voyage, mortality became less". Now referring to official documents which I required for my information from the Surgeon Superintendent I find 3 deaths in July, 8 in August, 8 in Sept. The ship arrived on the 20th. of this month and no less than 4 deaths took place the last week. It is worth remarking that it is only in this month the fatal cases are terminal scurvy. If the prisoners really took more nourishment during the last part of the voyage the mortality occurred during this time. The ship ought to have put in at the Cape of Good Hope

I proceed to another subject of inquiry not instituted by the Board, but well deserving the most searching investigation--Vize-- the terrible mortality rate of the children embarked, 49 in number, of whom 12 died on the passage. This is I believe the first time the experiment has been made in so extensive a scale and it is to be hoped it will be the last.

It has been seen that 19 female adults perished among 133. I find that no less than 12 of them were mothers and four lost their children. Eight left 16 orphans of them 5 were infants under 2 years, admitted into the nursery at at Hobart Town. One has since died and there is every appearance that other deaths will follow.

Of the 12 deaths among the children all were under 2 years. These are melancholy but most important medical statistics. They all died of Atrophy with its attendant bowel complaints. Scanty and unhealthy food, foul air, cold, wet and maternal neglect are sources of disease which infant life cannot long struggle against. That a mother, could have maintained an infant on the breast and brought it alive to this Colony, whose own nourishment, derived solely from a small portion of salt pork and ship biscuit daily appears indeed extraordinary. I am sure His Excellency will agree with me that infants of this tender age ought not be victims of transportation to this Colony and that it is imperative the Government at Home should learn the fact, I presume not yet known, that if this system be preserved, it will be one of infanticide at the ratio of at least 75 per cent.

I subjoin a copy of a letter from Dr. Derner in Medical Charge of the Nursery where infants under 2 years are admitted

I have the honour to be

Sir

Your obedient servant.

John Clark M.D.

Dept. of Insp. General of Hospitals.

V.D.L.

The Colonial Secretary

V.D.L.

Letter from W. Dermer M.D. Colonial Assistant Surgeon to John Clark M.D.
Deputy Inspector of Hospitals

*Nursery, Dynnyrne House,
23rd. October 1843.*

Sir,

Seventeen children landed from the "East London" and were received into this Establishment in a very sickly state of health, five have since died. Their names and ages are in the margin. Some of the remainder are still sickly, others are recovering and I beg to observe that one half of the children who accompany their mothers to this Colony die, and the whole of them sickly.

Nothing is wanted or neglected in the way of nourishment or medicine to sustain them but such is the debilitated state to which they are reduced during the long voyage that they prove fruitless in the majority of cases.

*I have -----
(signed) W. Dermer M.D.
Col. Asst. Surgeon.*

*John E. Clark Esq. M.D.
Dpt. Inspt. General*

Names noted in the margin

*: ? Iwin 20 months
John Brady 2 years 9 months (Actually Judy Brady)
? Carney 17 months
? Murray 14 months
? Bennett 14 months.*

John Clark M.D. to the Colonial Secretary

*H.M.O.'s Office
24th.Oct. 1843*

Sir,

In reference to my letter of the 6th.inst. commenting on the great mortality among the women and children which lately took place on board the female convict ship "East London".

*I have the honor of forwarding a copy of a letter from Dr. Dermer in medical charge of the infants in the nursery Hobart Town; from which it will appear that five more children have died---Four of whom were under two years of age
Thus twenty -three under two years were embarked on board the East London", of whom twelve perished on the voyage, and four in the Nursery:- of seven remaining there is a probability that other deaths will follow.*

*I have the honor to be,
Sir
Your very obedt. servant,
John M. Clark M.D.
Dep. Insp. Gnl. of Hosp.*

The Colonial Secretary.

Letter from Edward Caldwell to Sir William Burnett, Inspector General of the Navy

Sir,

I feel desirous that every information in my power should be given of those embarked at Dublin for Hobart Town. 133 females ---19 deaths occurring left 114 which were landed September 28th 1843.

The first party embarked were 60 in number from the Penitentiary 6 deaths occurring amongst them having been victims to disease. 54 of them landed in good health having had all the advantages of the diet and discipline of the penitentiary. The 2nd. embarkation consisted of 73 from the different jails of whom 13 died leaving 60----- the last embarkation required every attention as to regimen ventilation and cleanliness. I beg to observe that there was an ample supply of water during the whole of the voyage

Your Obedt. Servant

Edward Caldwell

Sir W. Burnett

Sir William Burnett's Response

I have carefully, perused Mr. Caldwell's Medical Journal for this Ship and have also had several conversations with him on different points which appeared to me to require explanation and though the mortality has undoubtedly been very great the more so as no contagious diseases existed in the Ship. The mortality amongst the women appeared greater in proportion amongst those who were received direct from the different gaols than amongst those received from the penitentiary] and the deaths amongst the children were chiefly occasioned by their mothers from their own state of health being unable to nourish or attend to them.

I do not find that neglect or improper treatment can be fairly charged against the Surgeon.

W.B.

Dated 10th. August 1844.