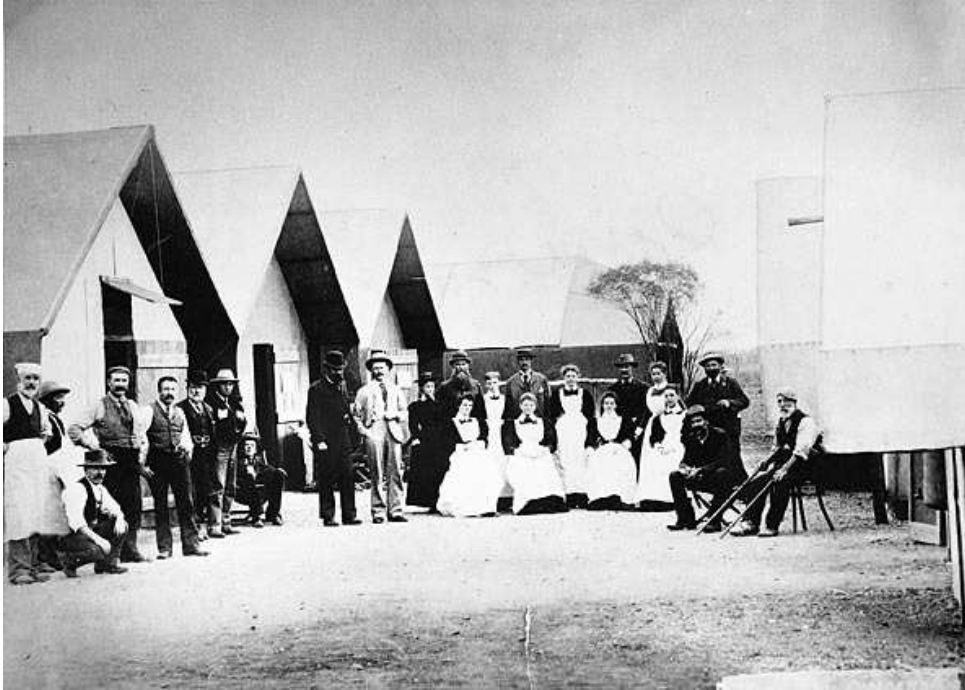


Government Hospital exterior, Coolgardie, c1895



Description

This is a black-and-white photograph of a group of 24 people outside a group of tents that constituted the wards of Government Hospital in Coolgardie in about February or March 1895. The group includes seven nurses in uniform, a number of men in suits and two men in aprons. The tents are large, with wooden walls and frames, and stand on bare earth. The photograph measures 16.5 cm x 19.0 cm.

Educational value

- This asset shows what was known as the Government Hospital in Coolgardie - at first the hospital was not strictly speaking a government institution, as the Government met only half of the expenses; it was managed by a local committee who had to raise funds through, for example, balls and concerts; the hospital was the target of much attention and criticism from the press because of the high number of deaths, but it had neither enough money nor enough staff to improve performance; critical newspapers published regular details of admissions to the hospital and the number of deaths.
- It suggests by its size a substantial need for medical treatment in Coolgardie only three years after the discovery of gold - thousands of people rushed to the fields once gold was discovered; the area had not been settled previously, and did not have the necessary infrastructure to support so many; poor living conditions, including tent accommodation, no sanitary arrangements and the lack of a reliable and plentiful fresh-water supply exacerbated medical issues; diseases spread rapidly in the crowded camps; the new hospital could not meet the demand for beds, and nine or ten people were refused admission daily.
- It is an example of one of the government-funded facilities established in Coolgardie - the State Government acted to establish facilities, such as a hospital and school, because of the burgeoning population on the gold fields; while there were an estimated 5,000 people in the immediate surrounds by this



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stage, Coolgardie was the centre to which 20,000 people in the larger area would retreat in times of severe water shortages or typhoid epidemics.

- It suggests an organised local response to the water-borne typhoid outbreaks directly attributed to the lack of a reliable fresh-water supply - the hospital has an orderly layout and the uniformed staff present a professional appearance; in the earliest days on the fields, prospectors were obliged to travel to hospitals in Southern Cross, York or Perth, many dying on the way; most typhoid victims were young men but nurses themselves sometimes succumbed to the same disease; people, especially children, died from dehydration or high fevers with no water to rehydrate or cool them.
- It is a photograph of the 'new' Government Hospital that replaced the 'old' hospital in February 1895 - public agitation had resulted in more beds to cater for the burgeoning population and periodic typhoid epidemics; there were private hospitals, too, but they were more expensive and some pauper patients, as those who had no money for fees were called, could not afford them; at the time of the discovery of gold in 1892 only ten government hospitals existed in Western Australia with a total of 102 beds.
- It shows the hospital staff members - seven nurses are sitting or standing beside the matron; like their patients, the staff came from many different nations and from around Australia; a Japanese man did the hospital's washing, for instance, and a prominent member of Coolgardie's Afghan community was on the Hospital Board; there was no training school for nurses in Western Australia and most nurses came from Melbourne and Adelaide; the nurses had the highest training, qualifications and experience available at the time.
- It shows part of the buildings that made up a large hospital - the hospital grew from a small group of tents to what Nurse Bird, in 1898, called 'the most sadly busy place of all ... a collection of odd buildings with no surrounding fence; the first hospital block was built of stone and there were three other small, stone buildings near it: the dispensary, theatre and morgue; there were also long, corrugated-iron wards built up on piles, and a number of canvas wards'.

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