

Government Hospital ward, Coolgardie, c1897



Description

This is a black-and-white photograph, taken in Coolgardie in about 1897, of the interior of a hospital tent ward showing its wooden walls and roof supports. The tent is large, with a row of metal beds on each side and several deck chairs. Patients are lying in some of the beds and four uniformed nurses are on duty. The photograph measures 52.0 cm x 35.5 cm.

Educational value

- This asset shows the interior of one of the tent wards in the Government Hospital in Coolgardie, Western Australia - this is an 'improved' version of the original hospital, with windows and a floor as well as bedspreads, sheets and blankets.
- It provides details of a hospital interior in the mid-1890s - the ward contains narrow metal beds in close proximity to one another and has no screens or any other attempt to provide privacy for patients; this photograph may have been set up by the photographer as the ward appears to be very clean and the nurses and patients seem to be in posed positions; a description in a letter to the press in 1895 describes the hospitals in Coolgardie as having 'tents on frames with tarpaulings [sic] and bagging for carpets. "Squatter" and easy chairs, with good boxes for presses (cupboards for clothes or linen) and cool canvas waterbags made up the furniture, along with spring mattresses and bedding of the cleanest sort'.
- It shows one of the male wards in the Government Hospital - the hospital acquired its name because it received funding from the State Government, unlike the private hospitals; funding was not provided for women, as there were so few on the field, and at first they were turned away; the Hospital Committee later asked for donations from the public to erect an eight-bed tent ward for females.
- It suggests by its size a substantial need for medical treatment in Coolgardie five years after the discovery of gold - the population was in the tens of thousands



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and diseases such as dysentery and typhoid spread rapidly in the tent towns with poor sanitary arrangements and a insufficient fresh water; at the time, there was no effective cure for typhoid and no vaccine against it; ironically, the favoured treatment for typhoid at the time was immersion in cold baths.

- It shows some of the nurses who cared for patients - they came from Australia and overseas and ranged from Melbourne 'society girls' forced to find work when their families lost money through land speculation to nuns from religious orders; by the 1890s, nursing had become a professional and respectable occupation for women and this is probably reflected in the fact that they are wearing uniforms.

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