

HEALTH SERVICES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Wells L. G. — *Health, Healing and Society.*
(Ravan Press, Braamfontein)

by Edgar Brookes

In this brief but useful book Dr Wells and his wife, Dr Harrison, survey the health services of South Africa in the light of a recent study of the health care systems of Europe made with the help of the Christian Fellowship Trust.

Great honesty, real caring and the provision of useful information are characteristics of this pamphlet. As one analyses it, one feels that it can be divided into three parts.

The first of these is an examination of existing health services in South Africa. Inevitably this must bring out the great inequality that exists, even after years of effort, to improve the situation, between white and black services. The authors perform a useful service in telling us (p.2) that the two least important causes of death among whites are the two most important among Africans. These are diseases of the respiratory system and accidents, poisoning and violence. The State health policy, perhaps quite unconsciously, tends to be geared to European needs. The authors from their own experience at a missionary hospital find that "in many rural parts of South Africa, between 30% and 50% of African children die before their fifth birthday. In Cape Town in 1971 the infantile mortality rate was 12,8 for whites, 40,4 for Coloureds and 69,5 for Africans. Figures like these should arouse the intellect and challenge the conscience of all South Africans.

Rightly the authors deplore the jettisoning by the Nationalists in and after 1948 of the proposed National Health Service scheme and the neglect and final closing down of the Health Centres. There does not seem to be any convincing reason for this closing down except that the scheme had the ardent support of J. H. Hofmeyr.

This part of the book is well done, and so is the second strand in their thinking, the attempt to evaluate the rôle of Christian Mission Hospitals. There is no doubt that, other things being equal (they are not always), there is a more personal relationship between the missionary doctor and his patients, and more scope for experimentation in the psychological and social services rendered. But the authors show unexpected equanimity as they face the State's taking over mission hospitals and, though their treatment of the subject is stimulating, it leaves a number of questions open.

It is on the third aspect of the book—a strong plea for the training of medical auxiliaries, that this reviewer is reluctantly compelled to join issue with the authors. We cannot raise this question, as they tend to do, *in vacuo*. Two efforts to do this have been made. The second was completely ruined by the abandonment of the National Health Service scheme and the closing down of the Health Centres, in which and in which alone the medical aids could have had a status and real utility. African reactions to any attempt to reintroduce sub-medical training will undoubtedly be hostile. It will be said, and deeply felt, that Africans are being offered inferior training and permanently subordinate status. And where are the students to come from who will be willing to choose this and not a full medical course? The tragic disappointment of 1948 is still remembered by the African people.

Naturally one is hesitant to denigrate a proposal which is so obviously dear to these enthusiastic and sincere research workers. The book should be read and readers will have to decide for themselves whether this suggestion is practical. This reviewer thinks it is not. □