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Public virtue, private ambition: The quiet rise of entrepreneurial women in New Zealand's private hospitals 1900 – 1935

The private hospital sector in early twentieth century New Zealand emerged as fertile ground for a group of women seeking to secure their agency and independence in the paternalistic hospital hierarchy dominated by medical men. In the first decade of the century New Zealand's health service had evolved into a two-tier system of Government-owned public hospitals in most of the country's major towns. This was supported by a network of 200 private hospitals which grew to 327 at its peak two decades later. The strong legislative framework introduced between 1901 and 1906 requiring nurses, midwives, and their hospitals to be registered, licensed and regularly monitored could potentially have put a strait jacket around the industry. Instead, the Nurses Registration Act 1901, the Midwives Act 1904, and the Private Hospitals Act 1906 provided an environment where many women were able to succeed, becoming politically, financially, and vocationally savvy in order to meet the exacting standards of the evolving regulatory environment. Private hospitals provided medical, surgical, and maternity services throughout the country, often in smaller rural areas and almost exclusively owned and/or run by nurses and midwives. This paper will argue that the creation of this significant medical, social, and commercial sector dominated by women broke with the traditional idea of nurses as carers and handmaidens to the doctors and positioned them as enterprising businesswomen and employers who made significant contributions to their communities and created another milestone in the development of modern nursing.