OLD ALBION PARK 1900-1925: BUSH MEDICINE:

Country folk were hardy souls (they had need to be) and most illnesses, unless really serious, were home treated in preference to having a doctor drive a horse and sulky fifteen miles from Wollongong or Kiama for the crippling fee of $1.25 for a home visit.

However, and usually in the case of pneumonia, word would fly around the district that Jack So-and-So was at death’s door, the doctor was at the bedside waiting all night for the crisis expected in the early hours of the morning, a steam tent had been rigged over the patient and a special nurse had been engaged. These were the upper crust of the nursing profession and commanded the high salary of $8.00 per week.

Hospital treatment was rare other than for surgery. Maternity cases were handled in the home by the local midwife, elderly and untrained, but with skill and know-how born of long practice and rule of thumb methods.

In this role Albion Park possessed old Mrs. Hurry, in looks and dress a replica of Queen Victoria. She seemed to spend much time in her small cottage preparing and plaiting strands of cabbage palm leaf into long flat lengths which she then fashioned and stitched into “cabbage tree” hats for men. Many old-timers would wear nothing else.

Having been bespoken to preside at a pending birth, she would pack her bag and be ready day or night to sally forth when some frustrated farmer arrived at her door behind a sweating horse.

My six brothers and sisters and I were all introduced squalling to the light of day by Mrs. Hurry, for which dubious service she charged $2.00 a head. A family of seven for seven quid was cheap nation building.

On a couple of rare occasions an operation on one of the more affluent residents was performed on the dining table in his home by a Sydney surgeon, who would arrive accompanied by a couple of nursing sisters in a special train composed of one passenger carriage, a locomotive and guard’s van. It cost $150.00 for the charter and would wait in the local rail siding until the team was ready to return, mission completed and cheque in hand.

Plenty of old fashioned country beliefs still persisted, and there was great reliance on the weekly dose of senna tea to children to clear the blood, kerosene on sugar for colds, spider web to stop a bleeding cut, a dirty sock around the neck to cure a sore throat, a potato carried in the pocket for rheumatism, and red flannel underwear for backache. A snake-skin belt weakened the back. Venice turpentine would drag out the largest splinter. In summertime a red rag around a horse’s neck would scare off botflies.

A popular liniment was made by boiling a quantity of marshmallow weed and adding to the liquor, when strained, one goose egg and a nogggin each of turpentine and linseed oil. It was good for athletes—they had to run fast to keep ahead of the smell.

With doctors few and far between it was inevitable that a quack healer would from time to time descend on the place with guarantees of a cure for any ailment that was presented to him; leaving behind scores of bottles of useless rubbish and pots of vile potions, and with a pocketful of hopeful money, these crooks would then disappear, never to return.

—B. E. WESTON.