

## INTRODUCTION

# The patient was considered first . . .

**The title, *Patients First*, was purposefully not decided until the last minute.**

It was one of three possible names on the short list – *End of Era* was the obvious choice because that was why the book was originally commissioned but as the book progressed, the words "proud" and "pride" kept cropping up so a tentative title *Pride of the People* was pencilled in for consideration.

This book actually had the working title of *Taumarunui Hospital* – that was simple and obvious but this book deserved more than that. It had to sum up what everyone felt. Without a doubt, the community was proud of its hospital and it thrived on community support. It was an institution that united the community – they shared in it and cared about it.

There was certainly a sense of pride and when the Taumarunui Hospital Board decided to market itself during the 1980s, they talked about the proud traditions of their hospital. Suddenly, there it was – a perfect sub title.

During this period, when the hospital was battling for survival, Chairman David Kydd said his Board believed that a lateral thinking approach to delivery of health care would benefit the consumer. "For, in the end," he said, "it is the consumer who will judge, and it is to the benefit of the consumer that New Zealand services must be addressed."

David, and his Board, realised that regardless of the politics, their first call of duty was to the patient. It was the patient who was to be considered first and it was the patient who would judge how good their dose of tender loving care was.

Just ask any front line nurse or doctor why they were so dedicated to their jobs? Was it the patient or themselves?

Just before the Hospital Board legally went out of existence in 1989, Beth Lawson, a nurse of 27 years experience, summed up the feelings of all those who passed before. She said that despite all the changes in the health system, her greatest love was for those who mattered most – the patients.

From the very first patient in 1909 and throughout every following decade and every passing generation, it was the same story. The patient came first, and that was, without doubt, the proud tradition of Taumarunui Hospital.

Deciding whether *Patients First* was an appropriate title that neatly summed up the contents of this book was much easier than compiling its contents. I had read somewhere that the history of the hospital would turn out to be a long and often troubled story but I did wonder

at times whether the roles were being reversed.

My involvement with this challenging task started near the end of July 1989 when John Woodroffe, Acting General Manager of the Taumarunui Hospital, invited me to attend a Board meeting to broadly discuss publishing a history booklet to co-incide with an "End of Era" reunion being planned for 9 & 10

December 1989. The End of Era function was to mark a sad occasion of when the Taumarunui Hospital Board would go out of existence after nearly 75 years of faithful and dedicated service to the community.

Members of the final Board did not want their history disappearing into the mists of time and be conveniently forgotten. The achievements of their



**The philosophy of putting patients first saw an unprecedented response from those around New Zealand who were trapped on long waiting lists for non-urgent surgery. Taumarunui Hospital had gone public in April 1987 by marketing its medical services to out-of-town patients and in less than nine months had attracted its 1000th admission. It was an important milestone which was marked by presenting Mrs Jillian Hawken of Mangamahu (near Wanganui) with a special gift pack of towels inscribed with "Taumarunui". Nurse Patricia Harris (left) is pictured with Mrs Hawken who described her visit as "peaceful and pleasant".**

- photo courtesy Taumarunui Gazette.

# Everything but the body

*What was Taumarunui like before its first hospital was established? Who administered to the sick and cared for the injured? The need for medical services in this raw young King Country town was becoming obvious when railway construction workers started to arrive during 1903. For a quarter of a century before the arrival of a resident doctor the health of Taumarunui's small population was being adequately tended to firstly by Alexander Bell and later by the Rev John Egerton Ward.*

**Numerous references indicate that Alexander Bell, the first European to settle permanently in Taumarunui, could well have been the town's earliest "doctor" and chemist.**

Records show during his lifetime Bell was appointed by the government of the day as magistrate, surveyor, postmaster and dispenser of medicines.

He arrived in 1874 and apart from being absent for a number of years prior to 1883, became recognised, over the following years, as the "people's trader" after being installed as the local store-keeper.

The editor of the *Taumarunui Press* confirmed these various responsibilities when he described Bell, in an 1916 article,

as "the medico, apothecary (pharmacist), coroner, jury, undertaker and everything but the body."

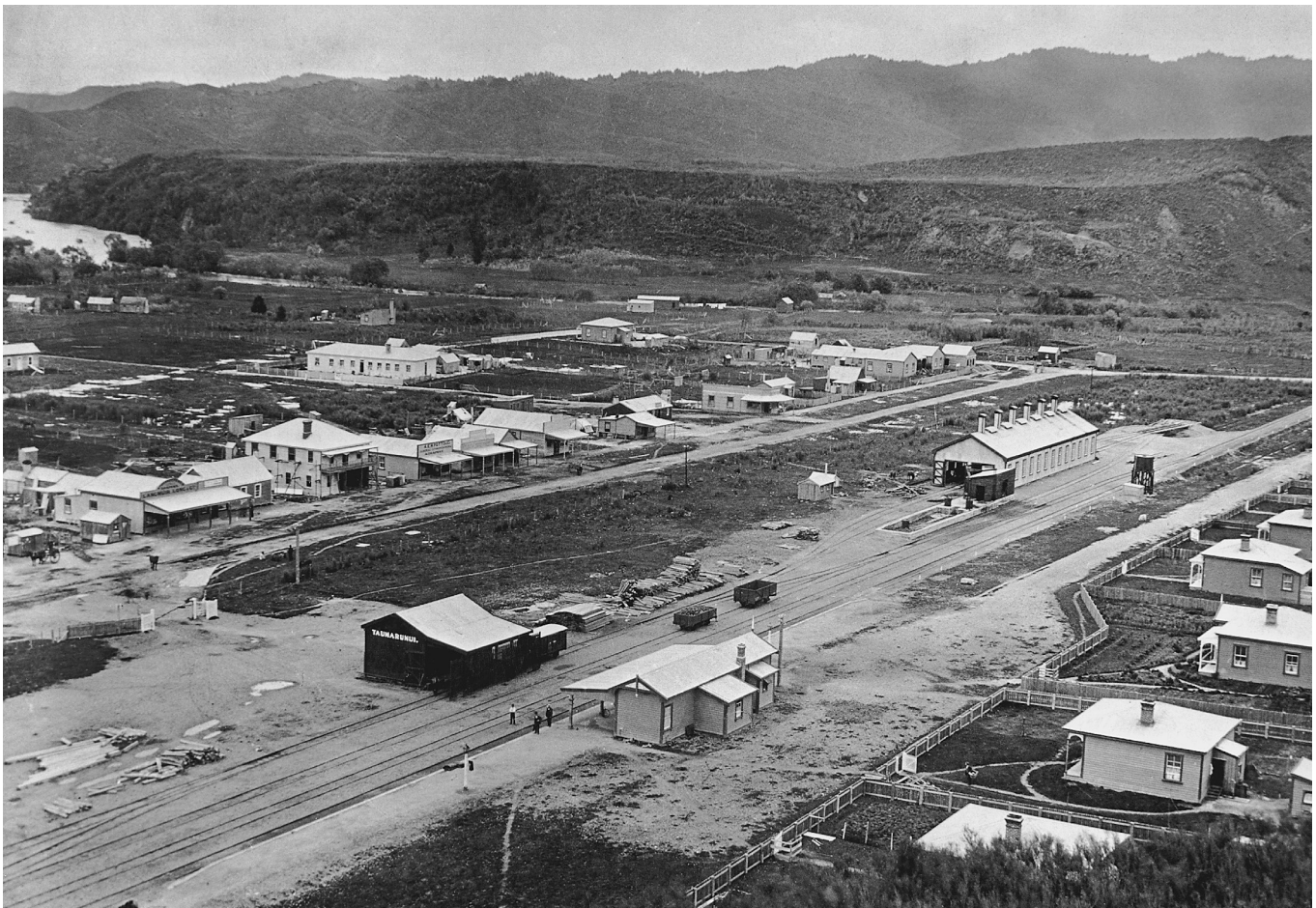
In his book *The Inky Way*, author William Thomas quotes from Bell's diary a sad affair concerning a Maori girl who came to the doctor in search of medicine to cure her tummy ache. The diary entry read: "First day – prescribed Mary a dose of Epsom salts – second day, Mary died; third day, held an inquest; fourth day, a tangi; fifth day – conducted funeral, poor Mary!"

Bell certainly was a Jack of all trades. He had to be. There wasn't anyone else to take on the responsibilities. He played an important role in the initial development of the town and was deservedly cast in

the courageous mould of the real pioneer. He loved the life of the cheerful Maori free from burden and "white man troubles," and as Bell would say, "no bills or bits of blue paper, but plenty of wild pigeons, fish, meat and potatoes."

Bell and his respected wife, Katarina Te Waihanea, a daughter of Te Awhitu, a great Taumarunui Rangitira, were noted for their hospitality to any stray pakeha who wandered in the district. Katarina's kindness earned her the title, "Mother of Taumarunui."

Alexander Bell continued to be a philosopher and friend to all after the death of his wife in 1910. The local newspaper once reported that he had the strength of character and no man could boss him.



***This is how the fledgling town of Taumarunui appeared in 1906 when some of its leading residents were pushing for the establishment of a cottage hospital. The main trunk railway had reached Taumarunui during 1903 and with it came the construction workers, bushwhackers, sawmillers and track layers who were all prime candidates for accidents and health care. Charles Winkelmann, a chemist, arrived during 1904 with a resident doctor, William Cairns, arriving the following year to meet this demand.***

- photo courtesy Taumarunui Borough Council collection.