



The Incurables Movement: A Victorian Healthcare Revolution

Sinead Moriarty



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- Victorian Incurables Movement
- The role played by the Royal Hospital for Incurables
- The first patient casebooks

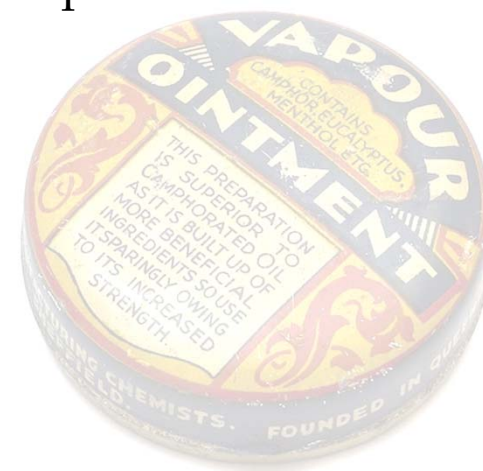


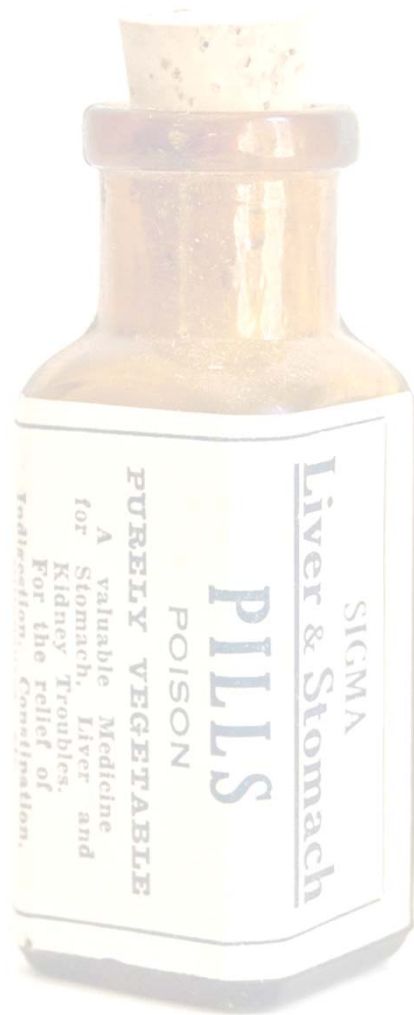


Royal Hospital for Incurables, Dublin
Established 1743

The Royal Hospital for Incurables, Donnybrook Dublin

- Now known as Royal Hospital Donnybrook
- Journal of the House of Commons from 1818-1819 show that the RHI in Dublin was receiving around £465 from Parliament per year.
- Established as a charitable hospital through the work of the Dublin Charitable Musical Society.
- Originally home to 23 people the hospital quickly expanded to accommodate 84 patients.





Jason Szabo has found that in France, general hospitals stopped accepting people who were diagnosed as “incurable” because: ‘experience confirmed that supplying the elderly, infirm, and incurable with life’s basic necessities allowed them to drain the public longer and deeper.’

- Jason Szabo, *Incurable and Intolerable*, 2009

Usually the sick in the almshouse were visited, under a contractual arrangement, by a doctor who practiced in the nearby community. They were nursed by inmates – old women [...] prostitutes picked up for soliciting or vagrancy, or others convicted of petty offenses.

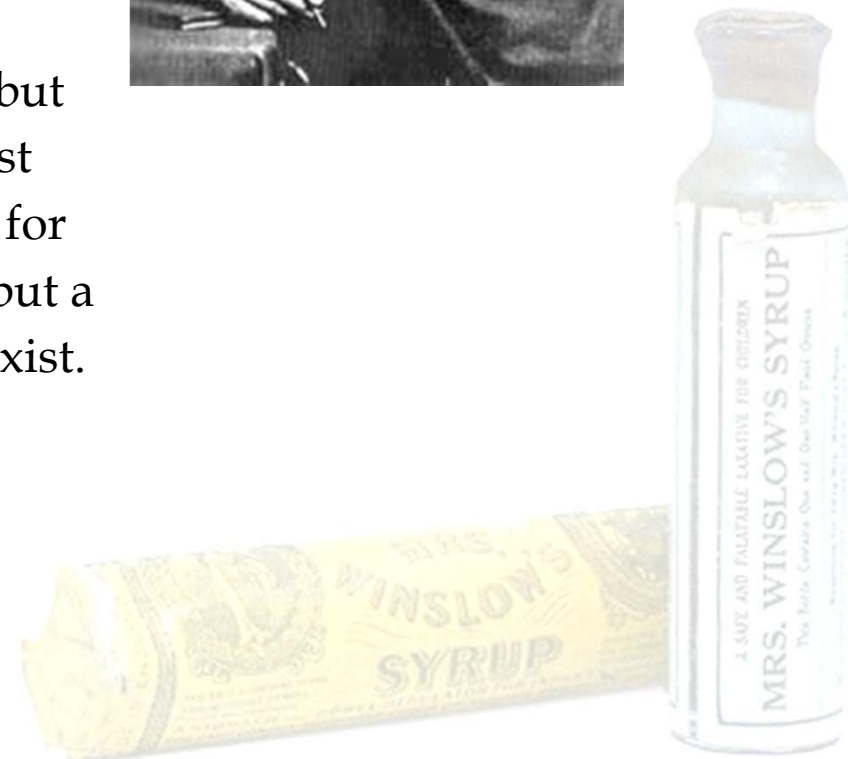
Under the circumstances medical attention was sometimes casual and inept, while nursing was often slovenly, callous, even cruel.

- Harry Dowling, *City Hospitals: The Undercare of the Underprivileged*, 1982



It is an extraordinary fact, that among the innumerable medical charities with which this country abounds, there is not one for the help of those who, of all others, most require succour ... There are hospitals for the cure of every possible ailment or disease known to suffering humanity, but not one for the reception of persons past cure. There are, indeed, small charities for incurables scattered over the country; but a large hospital for incurables does not exist.

- Charles Dickens, *Household Words*



What, then, shall be done for the many, who equally worthy with ourselves, are languishing at our feet, and whom disease and despair are dragging down to the grave? Do we resolve on action? Then let us ACT AT ONCE,- ACT GENEROUSLY, - ACT NOBLY, - suitably to the bitter urgency of the case.

- Dr Reed quoted in *Memoirs of the Life and Philanthropic Works of Andrew Reed*, Andrew Reed & Charles Reed (eds)



Dr Andrew Reed (1787 - 1862)



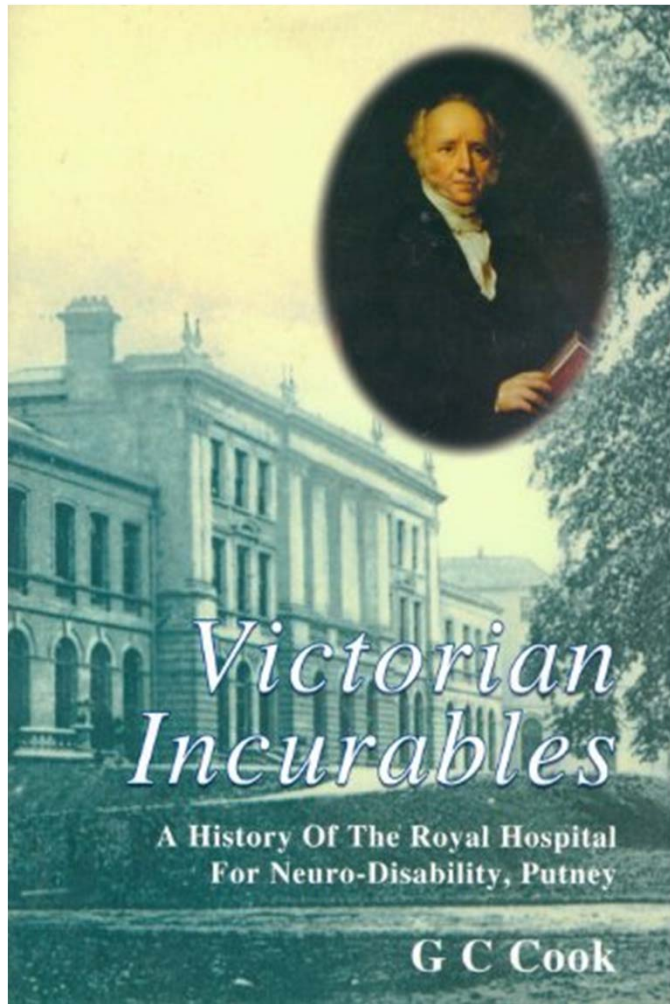
The term incurable was generally applied to a series of chronic diseases only rarely to acute illnesses. Some of these disorders, including scrofula (tuberculosis of the lymph glands), are not quite uncommon in Western countries. Others, such as darters (a series of devastating skin conditions caused by, among other things, syphilis and tuberculosis), have disappeared. [...] Certain conditions such as cancer and heart disease are, of course, still deadly today. Yet the range of illnesses our predecessors considered incurable was clearly different from the disorders that we now perceive as irremediable.

- Jason Szabo, *Incurable and Intolerable*, 2009



- Northern Counties Hospital and Home for Incurables – 1882 – 1990
- Royal Midland Counties Home for Incurables – 1874 - 1996
- British Hospital and Home for Incurables
- Dundee Hospital for Incurables - founded 1903



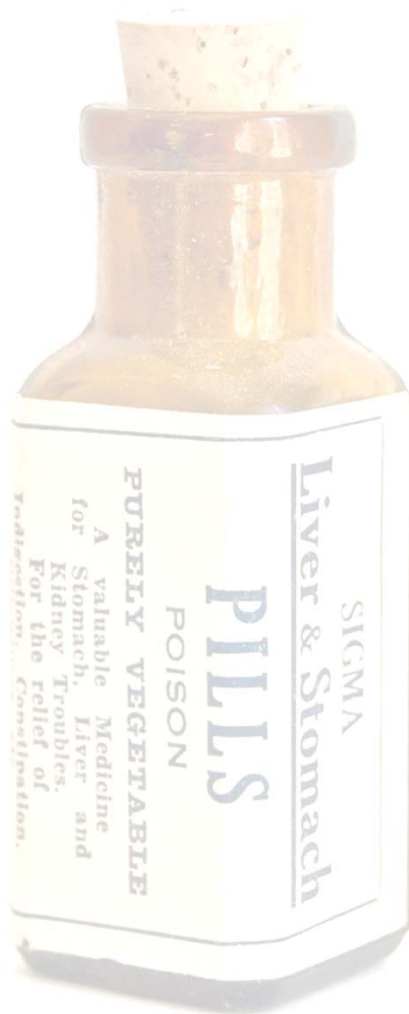


It is important to emphasise the pioneering role of the RHI in this new arena, without which the speciality (which now incorporates rehabilitation medicine) might never have “got off the ground”.

- Gordon C. Cook, *Victorian Incurables*, 2004



First applicants to the new Royal Hospital for Incurables



- Nathaniel
- Sarah
- Julia
- Joseph
- Charles
- Ann
- Frederick
- James

- **Nathanial** is the first patient listed in the records of the newly established Royal Hospital for Incurables.
- He was living near Old Street in London
- His parents were straw bonnet makers
- His application to the RHI states that he is suffering from “nervous disorder”



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“I am an incurable invalid, entirely a prisoner of my bed (except during a periodical migration) and overwhelmed with business.”



- The second patient listed in the RHI's patient intake books is a woman called **Sarah**
- Sarah was 49 year old
- She lived in Whitechapel
- For 2 years she had been suffering from chronic bronchitis.
- She stated that her only source of income was that she, "Attends upon a poor invalid earning sometimes six shillings per week."
- Sarah was accepted for admittance to the RHI but died before she could come to the hospital.



- The third patient listed in the RHI records is **Julia**.
- Julia was 29 years old when she applied to come to the RHN.
- She had been living with her mother in Walworth, but her mother had been widowed and was struggling to cope.
- Her reason for applying is listed as “paralysis”.
- Julie was admitted to the RHI in November 1854 and would stay at the hospital for 52 years until her death in 1906 at the age of 81.





RECEIVED
5- DEC 1931
308/rs

47 Coronation Road,
Great Crosby,
near Liverpool,
2 December 1931.

Dear Sir,

The death of my sister Mary Jane Curtis will, in all probability, remove from the list of inmates of the Royal Hospital for Incurables the oldest in point of time. I can remember accompanying my father in the latter part of 1869 when he took her to Melrose Hall and left her in South Ward. It is a wonderful record to have survived close on sixty-two years

despite her great bodily infirmity added to the ailments to which ordinary mortals are subject to of which she had more than the usual share.

I wish to take the earliest opportunity of expressing my sincerest thanks to all the officials of the Institution for their great care and kindness to my sister during the long period of her existence in the hospital. The personnel has changed many times, but the spirit has always been the same. The one great desire and endeavour of those

responsible for the administration has been the happiness and comfort of the inmates.

Of course it is not an easy matter for the nurses and others to deal with those whose physical weakness and suffering creates a certain degree of irritability. On the whole, however, it is really wonderful how much patience is shown by the former and I know appreciated by the latter. My sister was never tired of expressing to me her gratitude to all on whom she depended for her spiritual as well as bodily requirements.

Will you therefore be so good as to convey to your Committee and the officials my deep sense of gratitude to them all for what they have done to brighten the life of my afflicted sister.

Yours sincerely,
W. Kingston Curtis

P.S.

My other sister (Mrs. Tilly) and my niece (Mrs. Ness) desire to associate themselves with the above.

W.K.C.

Charles Curtis Esq.

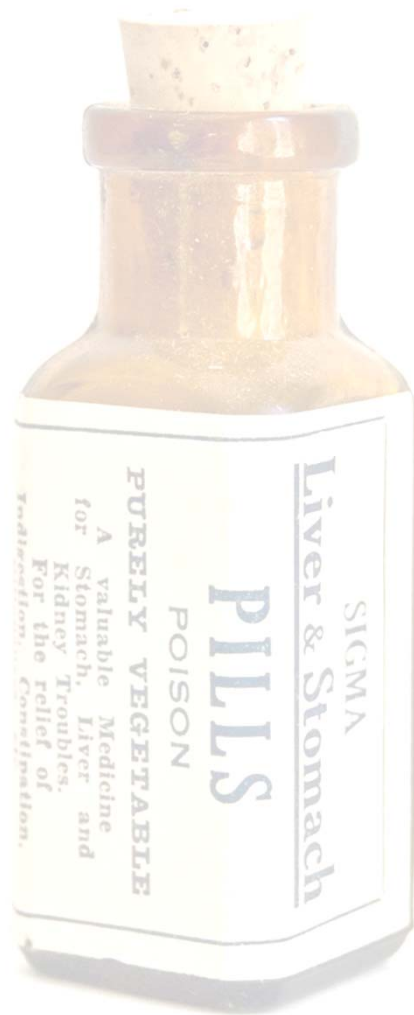
- The fourth and fifth people listed in the RHI records are **Charles** and **Joseph**.
- Charles was 40 years old when he applied.
- He was living in Southwark and was suffering from “affliction of the liver and nervous disease.”
- His only means of support was some small donations from the local clergy.
- Joseph was 38 and living in Spitafields.
- He had been paralysed after an accident 3 years previously.
- He was living with his brother.
- Both men were declined “as pauper case”



Besides these, there are in our metropolis at least **an equal number who are above the position of the mere pauper, and who would rather perish than descend to it;** who, by disease, by accident or congenital deformity, are wholly and permanently disqualified for the uses or enjoyments of life.

- Andrew Reed, *Memoirs of the Life and Philanthropic Works of Andrew Reed*





They cannot beg, for they have been accustomed to work; they refuse to be paupers, for they have wooed independence as their better life. They have been struck down from their honourable standing by ruthless disease and accident; and what is to save them from the dreadful extremities of poverty, want, despair, and death?

- Andrew Reed, *Memoirs of the Life and Philanthropic Works of Andrew Reed*

- Another early patient was **Ann**, a thirty-five year old woman who was living in Finsbury in North London.
- Ann was living with her sister, a boarding house keeper.
- Her application notes that she was living with epilepsy.
- 9 of the first 100 patients to apply for care at the RHN stated that they were living with epilepsy.
- Epilepsy was widely misunderstood during the Victorian period.
- Ann was accepted for admission but was later discharged as “a violent case”



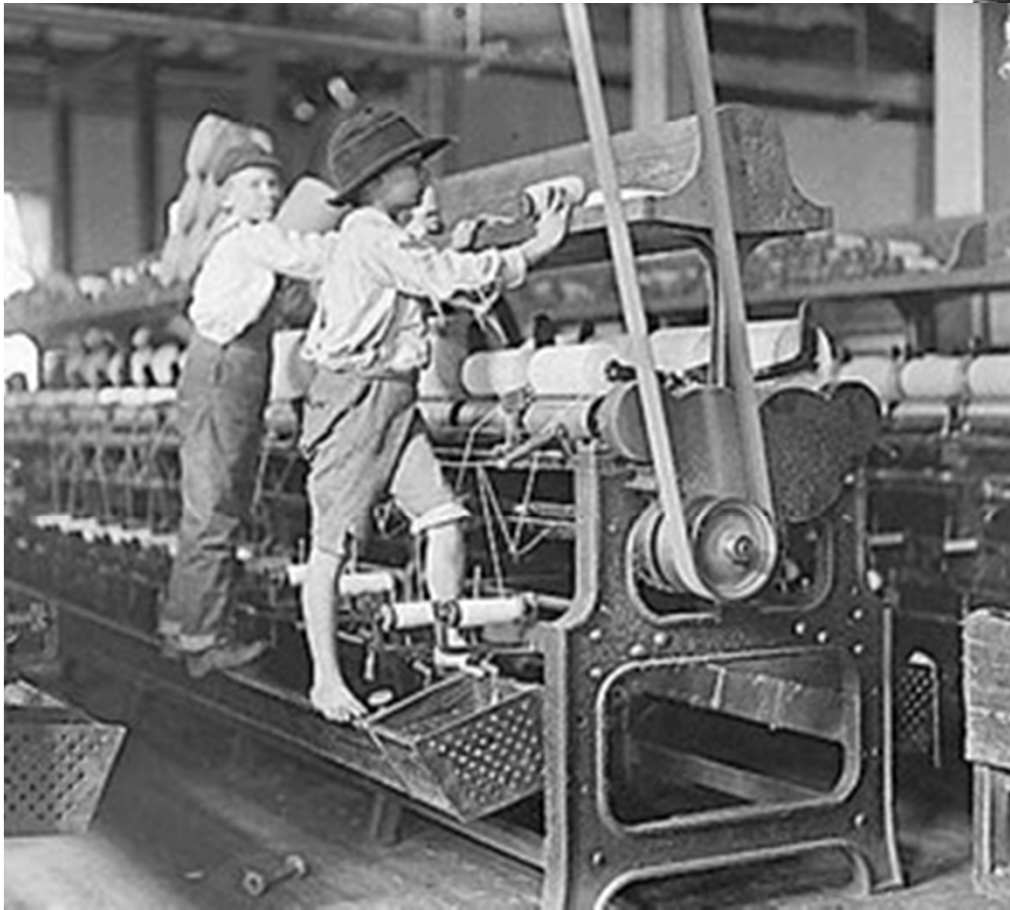
- The 10th patient listed in the RHI admission books is a young man named **Frederick**
- Frederick was 27 years old when he was admitted to the RHI.
- At the time he applied he was living with his father in Peckham.
- The record notes that his father's "circumstances are necessitous" implying that he was struggling to financially support Frederick.
- Frederick's father listed his reason for applying to the RHI as "Idiocy"
- This was a common medical term in the Victorian period which is now understood to be extremely insulting but was part of the language used to describe learning disabilities.



- One of the most moving stories to be found in the early casebooks is that of **James**
- James was born in 1842.
- He lived in West Felton with his parents whose occupation is listed as “agricultural workers”
- James was only 12 when he applied to come to the RHI.
- When he was 11 he suffered a severe injury and lost both of his arms. The record states: “arms taken off by a machine”



Conditions for child workers in Victorian Britain were very dangerous.



Fatal or devastating workplace accidents were distressingly common in the nineteenth century, particularly in fields like mining and railroad work, but they were not limited to these fields. Even traditional industries like farming and construction consumed lives and limbs. Factory production, while creating fewer fatal accidents than mining, created large numbers of industrial amputations.

- James Bronstein, *Caught in the Machinery: Workplace Accidents and Injured Workers in Nineteenth Century Britain*, 2008



"When I was a surgeon in the infirmary, accidents were very often admitted to the infirmary, through the children's hands and arms having being caught in the machinery; [...] Last summer I visited Lever Street School. The number of children at that time in the school, who were employed in factories, was 106. The number of children who had received injuries from the machinery amounted to very nearly one half. There were forty-seven injured in this way."

- Dr Michael Ward in testimony to a Parliamentary Committee in 1819



"I have seen a little boy, only this winter, who works in the mill, and who lives within two hundred or three hundred yards of my own door; he is not yet six years old, and I have seen him, when he had a few coppers in his pocket, go to a beer shop, call for a glass of ale, and drink as boldly as any full-grown man, cursing and swearing."

- Abraham Whitehead in testimony to a Parliamentary Committee in 1832





Thank you for listening !

Sinead Moriarty

