



LONG-TERM PATIENT . . . but unlike the older lepers at Westfort, Aggie is able to lead a more normal life
Picture: JON HRUSA

No visitors for the leper whose home is hospital

By CAS ST LEGER

FOR 52 years, the serenity of a turn-of-the-century hospital has been the only home that "Groen", a leper, has known.

The 77-year-old patient has not had a single visitor since he was admitted to Westfort hospital outside Pretoria in 1942. He lost both his legs in 1958 after they went septic, and leprosy has left him with damaged facial muscles.

Before he was confined to his wheelchair, he kept himself busy by working in the hospital gardens. Then he was made "foreman" of the patients.

Groen regards the hospital as his home — he has no children, and has nowhere else to go.

Another leper, Sarah, has been a patient for 66 of her 80 years. She was cured of her leprosy many years ago, but, like Groen, she has no other home.

When Sarah arrived at Westfort hospital from Bethlehem in 1928, she was a plump, pretty 14-year-old who had lost the feeling in her hands and feet.

"I was sent here by the government," she said.

Now she spends her days dozing, her fingers reduced to stumps by the disease.

She does know, though, from radio and the hospital TV, that an election is coming up. "I want to vote," she says.

She has no family and is vague about her age. "I can't remember," she smiles.

A proud nursing sister retrieves her original file, complete with Sarah's yellowed admission photograph.

When Sarah and Groen were admitted, Westfort was a busy leprosy hospital with more than 1 000 patients.

Such is South Africa's success in treating the disease that there are now just 40 patients, with numbers dropping every year. There were 58 admissions in 1990,

compared with hundreds in the 1960s.

Former leprosy wards have been filled with an overflow of about 400 mental patients from Weskoppies hospital.

As a testament to the former population of Westfort, four little churches stand empty on overgrown land. Several of the hospital buildings are in line to be declared historic monuments.

Many of the original Westfort patients came from the old leper colony on Robben Island, in the days when the disease was thought to be highly infectious.

That is one of the many misconceptions about this ancient disease. "Unlike TB, leprosy has a very low rate of infectivity," said Dr Louis Shulman, Westfort's acting superintendent.

In 30 years, not one nurse has contracted leprosy.

The other misconception is that leprosy causes fingers and toes to drop off.

Dr Marie Beyers, medical officer in charge of leprosy at Westfort, points to the stumps of 41-year-old Aggie's fingers.

"Look. She still has her fingernails," she said.

Dr Beyers explained that rather than Aggie's fingers dropping off, micro-fractures of her bones had caused them to become shorter.

Unlike the older patients, Aggie, of Rustenberg, is able to live a more normal life. She has a husband, who is a mine transport officer, and three children.

She pays nothing for her treatment, and goes home "on holiday".

Leprosy is a disease of the nerves. Like tuberculosis, it is caused by bacteria. Unlike TB, the patient does not feel ill.

Today, with intense multi-drug therapy for six weeks, plus treatment and monitoring for at least two years, a 100 percent cure rate was possible, even in severe cases, Dr Beyers said.

'Horror' dad's weird bid

Own Correspondent: London

HOUSE OF HORROR accused Fred West wants to go to the funeral of his daughter, Heather — one of the nine women he is charged with murdering.

The House of Horrors accused made the astonishing request during a meeting with his son, Stephen, 20.

A family friend said this week: "Steve was taken to see his dad after his court appearance this week.

"He asked about the murders and what had happened to Heather. Fred told him — then said he wanted to go to the funeral."

Heather was 16 when she went missing. Her body was among those found at West's home in Cromwell Street, Gloucester.

Steve was the first member of the

family to see his father since his arrest. His wife, Rose, has said she never wants to see him again.

It has also been revealed that detectives are to investigate links between a child sex-ring and the murder case. They plan to interview a number of men and women who they believe were part of a paedophile group preying mainly on young girls, but also on boys.

A police source said: "They are all in the Gloucestershire area and there are family links between some of them.

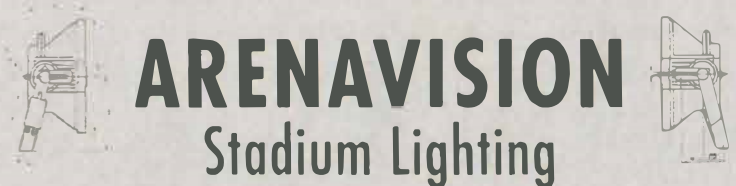
"This new lead widens the scope of the whole investigation. It means more people with connections to 25 Cromwell Street could be facing serious charges alongside Fred West," he said.



VOTE FREEDOM FRONT

Head Office: (012) 474477/4375 Regional Offices: Eastern Transvaal (01341) 91137, Northwest (018) 4841086, Northern Cape (053202) 878, Eastern Cape (041) 9926133, Western Cape (021) 553 656/Orange Free State (051) 301685/6, Northern Transvaal (0152) 2938060, PWV (012) 474450, Natal (031) 2060769.
Compiled by: The Freedom Front, Dr. Pieter Mulder, P.O. Box 74693, Lynnwood Ridge 0040

UP A BENSON & HEDGES



ARENAVISION
Stadium Lighting



PHILIPS
TECHNOLOGY
TO ENRICH YOUR LIFE