

SOCIAL SERVICE BENEFITS STILL DENIED TO ABORIGINES

By Shirley Andrews, Hon. Secretary, Council for
Aboriginal Rights)

The latest Social Services Act, proclaimed on September 30, 1959, removed most of the sections of the previous Act which excluded Aborigines from benefits. Although Government spokesmen claimed that in future Aborigines would be eligible for social services on terms of equality with the rest of the population, discriminatory practices still continue.

Failure to pay whole of benefits to Aborigines

Several sections of the Act provide for special ways of handling benefits in exceptional circumstances, e.g.:

Section 43 relating to Age and Invalid pensions: "Where the Director-General is satisfied that, for any reason, it is desirable that payment of a pension should be made to a person, institution or authority on behalf of the pensioner, the Director-General may authorize the payment accordingly."

Section 50 authorizes the payment of 33/- a week to pensioners in benevolent homes, the rest of the pension to be paid to the management of the home.

Section 51: "Where the Di-

rector-General is satisfied that a claimant for an age or invalid pension, although otherwise qualified to receive a pension, is unfit to be entrusted with a pension and should, in his own interests, enter a benevolent home, the Director-General may direct that a pension shall not be granted until the claimant has become an inmate of a benevolent home."

These rather authoritarian provisions are resented by non-Aboriginal pensioners but are applied in only a minority of cases. For Aborigines, they are being used frequently as a general policy for large groups of people. Direct payment of benefits to Aborigines is avoided wherever possible, and they are treated like irresponsible children. The official interpretation of these Sections as applied to the Aboriginal is set out in the Social Services J., Vol. 13, No. 1, February 1960, page 3, as follows:

"Three principles are being applied in paying pensions and maternity allowances to or for aborigines, viz:

(1) Where an aborigine has dem-

onstrated his ability to handle money wisely and to manage his own affairs, the payments will be made direct to him.

(2) Where an aborigine cannot handle the whole of the pension but perhaps some of it, the pension will be paid in two parts — one part to the aborigine as pocket money and the other part to some other authority to be used on his behalf. This is the principle which will generally be applied to aborigines on Government settlements, Church missions and pastoral properties.

(3) Only where a native, although not actually nomadic or primitive, is unable to handle any money at all will the whole of the pension be paid to some person or authority on his behalf.

It was anticipated at the outset that, because of differing policies pursued by the various States and differing standards of development and customs of the aborigines themselves, it would not be possible to bring about immediately uniformity of treatment throughout the Commonwealth. This proved to be the case and subject to such adjustments as may be necessary in the light of experience the following procedures have been adopted.

Payment will be made direct to the aborigine in New South Wales and Victoria. Where the pensioner requests, or where the Director of Social Services considers it desirable, the whole or part of the pension may be paid to some other person or authority on behalf of the pensioner. The same principles will apply to the payment of maternity allowances.

Where aborigines are living in a controlled community such as a Church mission, Government settlement or pastoral property, pensions will be paid on the institutional basis, i.e. portion will be paid to the aborigine for his own personal use and the balance will be paid to the authority controlling the community for the maintenance of the aborigine.

Because of the various stages of advancement of the aborigines, the personal or pocket money component will not be uniform in all cases but will vary from 10/- a week in the more remote areas to 33/- a week in the Government settlements in Queensland and on certain of the Church missions where the aborigines are sufficiently advanced to be able to handle that amount of money themselves."