

**The Matrons' Council Conference,**  
LONDON, JULY, 1899.

**THE BALANCE OF POWER IN HOSPITAL ADMINISTRATION.**

BY MISS M. MOLLETT,  
Matron Royal South Hants Infirmary.

LADIES,—The question before us for discussion is one that is of the very greatest importance for all of those amongst us whose work lies in our great modern institutions for the relief of sickness, but it will be impossible for me in the short space of time we can give to the subject to do more than touch upon one or two points bearing upon it.

The central governing power of all the hospitals with which I have been connected has always been a Committee, a body of men, or a body of men and women, appointed by the votes of those who, either voluntarily or under compulsion, supplied the funds for their maintenance; and this Committee was, therefore, responsible to the subscribers or rate-payers (as the case might be) for the proper expenditure of those funds, and for the proper government of the hospital or infirmary. That is, I believe, the fundamental principle of government in all English hospitals and infirmaries; and thus, behind all executive authority, lies the authority of a Committee, itself responsible to those whose votes have placed its members in power. But the details of the administration are, or should be, in the hands of executive officers, who are responsible to the Committee for the efficiency of their special department. For, in these days of complex modern life and minute specialization, it is difficult to master one branch of knowledge or work thoroughly, and the necessity of recognising this fact and of dividing the details of administration under separate heads, with a special knowledge of each special branch, is an essential feature in good hospital management.

In all hospitals of any size the administration should be divided into those three departments into which it falls almost naturally, *i.e.*, the medical, the nursing, and the secretarial. I know some people say that there should be a further separate department—the domestic—but I hold that in a hospital the domestic details are naturally included in the nursing, for nursing of the sick means, to a great extent, providing them with all those domestic comforts which can aid their recovery or make their sickness more bearable. Good food, fresh linen, cleanliness, and so forth, are all details of nursing for which the head nurse, the Matron of the hospital, should be responsible. And how can she be responsible if she is not in authority?

The success of an institution as a whole seldom depends on brilliant individual genius, but on well organized, even effort, to ensure which each department must work loyally with its fellows. Good medical work is hampered by bad nursing; good nursing is often useless in the hands of inferior medical men, whilst both good medical work and good nursing are placed at a great disadvantage by want of funds and lack of good general organization and secretarial mistakes in dealing with a touchy public.

But no department can do itself justice if it does not receive from the central governing body that authority without which all good government is impossible.

In all that concerns the actual medical treatment of the patients the medical man reigns supreme. In his hands the Committee place unreservedly the scientific charge of the patients. No one dreams of questioning his authority, nor would he for one moment accept the responsibility of his position if the fullest authority were not given him to use his own judgment in connection with his own work. Equally should the authority of the Matron be respected in her own department. Where friction occurs, it is always at those points where duties overlap, and it is in the careful defining of the limitations of the various departments that a Committee can show sound judgment.

But the ideal management to be striven after, that of three departments each officered by a head equal in authority, responsible to the Committee, is often shipwrecked by personal ambition and strength of character. It is difficult to sit still and watch others make a muddle of things which are "not your business," but which vitally affect you, and in which you are keenly interested.

The possession or non-possession of power will always be largely a question of personality.

The essence of power is the ability to coerce or persuade others to carry out our will. Some have it; some excellent people who ought to, haven't. No rules will make or mar the position of a strong man or a strong woman.

It is difficult, as long as the government of our hospitals is practically passive, to prevent a strong, able official, either Secretary, Doctor, or Matron, from obtaining an influence over the Committee, and using such influence to strengthen and extend his or her own authority. Length of service, intimate knowledge of the details of administration in any particular institution, will always give an efficient official a certain amount of power, unofficial and often unacknowledged, but very real, over others.

I have seen able Matrons backed by indulgent Committees, worry themselves to death, beating against the bars of petty rules, whilst I have

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)