

Professional Review.

ROYAL COMMISSION ON SOUTH AFRICAN HOSPITALS.*

The report of the Royal Commission appointed to consider and report upon the Care and Treatment of the Sick and Wounded during the South African Campaign and published in the form of a Blue Book is full of interest, more especially should it be studied by members of the medical and nursing professions who have naturally followed with keen interest the controversy which has raged with regard to the Care of the Sick and Wounded in South Africa, and who have waited with impatience for the Report of the Commission in order to be in a better position to form a correct estimate of the situation under discussion. It is impossible in a nursing journal, to review this Report without expressing a keen regret that though the Commission was necessarily concerned to a great extent with the nursing of the sick, yet no Superintendent of Nursing was appointed to act upon it.

CONSTITUTION OF THE COMMISSION.

The maintenance of the balance of the scales of justice, and the proper sifting of evidence were provided for in the appointment of Sir Robert Romer. Experts in medical matters were Sir William Church and Dr. Cunningham; the transport arrangements could be investigated by Mr. Frederic Harrison, General Manager of the London and North Western Railway, and Sir David Richmond safeguarded the interests of business. But neither a Lord Justice nor the President of the College of Physicians could bring to bear upon nursing matters the valuable practical experience of a trained nurse, and it is greatly to be regretted that in the composition of the Commission the interests of nurses were entirely omitted, and the sick and wounded whom they serve were debarred from the benefits which would doubtless have accrued to them from the suggestions of a nursing expert.

ARRANGEMENT OF THE REPORT.

The report is divided into four parts. Part I. gives a brief account of the proceedings taken by the Commission, how they first took evidence in London, and afterwards visited the hospitals in South Africa, and again took the evidence of one witness (Mrs. Richard Chamberlain) on their return to this country. Then they give generally their observations upon the evidence, and incidentally it may be pointed out that Mr. Burdett-Coutts' statement that it would be difficult to obtain the evidence of soldiers on account of their fear of prejudicing their subsequent career, and which was so warmly repudiated as an unworthy suggestion by the leader of the House of Commons, finds confirmation at the hands of the Commission who say:—"We have also had to recognise the fact that our private soldiers are very slow in making complaints. We think that this arises more from a feeling of loyalty to their cloth than from a fear of being punished for complaining to their superiors; though no doubt in some cases, especially while the men are in hospital, they may be deterred from complaining by fear of consequences." Lastly is included a short account of the work done by the Commission.

Part II. goes into detail on some important facts con-

* Published by Eyre and Spottiswoode, East Harding Street, Fleet Street, E. C. Price 8d.

nected with the subject of the inquiry. The first mentioned being that "the Royal Army Medical Corps was wholly insufficient in staff and equipment for such a war, and it was not so constituted as to have means provided by which its staff could be very materially enlarged, or its deficiencies promptly made good. These deficiencies were felt throughout the South African Campaign, as will more clearly appear when we deal in detail with the complaints which have been made in respect of the care of the sick and wounded." The ordinary provisions for the care of the sick and wounded of an army on active service at the front are then detailed, and the arrangements of the field hospitals described. These have no female nurses and are only intended for the temporary treatment of patients. They move with the advancing army and have an extremely light equipment. They are not intended to be used as fixed hospitals, but in the South African Campaign, it was necessary to use them largely as fixed hospitals.

The following comment was made by the Commission on the ambulance wagons at present supplied to the bearer companies. "We have tried these wagons. We found them very heavy, requiring a large number of mules to draw them, and very jolty and uncomfortable. The type of wagon used appears not to have been materially changed or improved upon for many years. We cannot help thinking that this type of ambulance could be, and should be, improved."

The Commission also believe that an improvement should be made in the type of marquee supplied to the Army. The question is, they consider, one for the consideration of military experts, but they add that, in their opinion, it should be investigated with a view to improvement.

REMARKS ON NURSES.

The remarks with regard to nurses are of interest. The Commission states that before this war the employment of nurses was but slightly recognised in the Army, and the few employed were expected to superintend the orderlies rather than to do the actual nursing. But in the course of the war it became obvious that nurses must be largely employed, and after this was recognised an increased supply was sent out, and they were "freely employed." Here the value of the advice of a trained nurse would have come in, for she would have been able to explain that the 20 nurses sent out latterly with each general hospital of 520 beds could by no means be considered an adequate staff. The number of nurses, in fact, is the same as that of medical officers.

"For enteric and other fever patients and such-like," say the Commission, "they appear to be far better than orderlies, and their general employment in fixed hospitals ought to be now generally recognised by the authorities and be provided for in future wars. In this war, at any rate at its commencement, some members of the Royal Army Medical Corps appear to have had a difficulty in divesting themselves of the old traditions of the Service, which are undoubtedly antagonistic to the employment of nurses in military hospitals. The nurses employed in this war have shown great devotion and many have lost their lives in the discharge of their duties. Scarcely any complaints have been made during the campaign with regard to the nurses. The soldiers have much appreciated their services, and seem to prefer to be attended by them to being attended to by orderlies."

(To be continued.)

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