

The Central Poor Law Conference.

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS.

The Agenda of the Thirty-First Annual Central Poor Law Conference, held in the Council Chamber of the Guildhall of the City of London on Tuesday and Wednesday, was an interesting one. The proceedings were opened by the Right Hon. the Lord Mayor (Sir Marcus Samuel), after which the President, the Hon. Sydney Holland—whose address we have pleasure in printing—took the chair. The papers read and discussed included "Labour Colonies in Relation to the Poor Law," (a) by Mr. Jesse Hawkes (Guardian of the Malling (Kent) Union), and (b) by Colonel Gerard C. Clark (Guardian of the Brentford Union); "What is Adequate Relief?" by Miss Sophia Lonsdale (Guardian of the Lichfield Union), and "The Treatment of the Feeble-Minded," by Mr. W. H. Dickinson (Chairman of the National Association for the Promotion of the Welfare of the Feeble-Minded, and an Alderman of the London County Council).

BED ROCK PRINCIPLES.

Mr. Holland said :—There is a widespread and deep feeling throughout the country that the sick poor ought to be properly nursed, and I feel very strongly myself that it is not only the duty of the country to ensure this, but that it is bad social economy, to put it on the lowest ground, not to cure and get back to his work any bread-winner stricken by illness, or a mother of a family, and I feel that it is bad economy to let little children grow up to face life maimed and weakened by illness. I feel that it is little short of cruelty, for which we deserve to be prosecuted, if we allow any poor person who has drifted into our power to drag out his death without doing our best to lessen his discomfort and suffering at the end of a life which has known but few joys or comforts.

That is bedrock—and if you grant this, I will go on and state another bedrock principle.

Wherever you have sick people there should be a properly-trained nurse, and, that being so, you must either take the nurse to the sick or the sick to the nurse.

If you grant this, I say that any Board of Guardians who fail to do this should be compelled to do so, and if the Local Government Board have no present power to enforce this they should apply to Parliament and get powers, and the whole feeling of every right-minded person would back them up. We have now at the head of the Local Government Board a strong man in Mr. Walter Long—a man who has shown independent powers of judgment and a will force which is very refreshing, and I have great hopes that he will take what is good in the Report of the Departmental Committee, and will not only be content with merely making recommendations, which to some Boards of Guardians seems only to have the effect of tickling their love of opposition to anything new, but he will, I hope, issue an Order to Guardians to carry out the Report.

Now to come to the Report, and in passing I must

express regret that on the Committee which framed that Report there were no experts in nursing.

Time will not allow me to deal with what is good in the Report, and there is much that is good. I will resist the temptation of dealing with the excellent suggestion of bringing the sick to the nurse by the amalgamation of small infirmaries. I know this is not popular with many guardians. And also I have no time to deal with the still more feasible plan of sending the sick from the small workhouses to the nearest cottage or general hospital and paying for this accommodation. Both these plans, if carried out, would lessen the difficulty of getting the patients properly nursed in small workhouses.

I have only time to criticise what has made all of us who care about nursing despair.

It is a matter of general rejoicing that the Committee have recommended that the position of the Superintendent Nurse should be better; that she, at any rate, should be in sole charge of the sick, and no longer under the commands of an untrained Matron, and that her duties should be clearly defined. All this is good. But to the despair of us all the Committee have suggested a very large reduction of Superintendent Nurses. They have recommended that the appointment of a Superintendent Nurse should be optional where there are only 60 to 100 occupied sick beds, and they recommend that the number of Superintendent Nurses should be reduced by 91, thus leaving 501 out of the 671 workhouses in England and Wales, as before. It is miserably disappointing to find that in the face of all public opinion, and contrary to every feeling of humanity, the standard of Poor Law nursing is to be thus lowered throughout the country. In these 501 workhouses the trained nurse (if they have one) will still be under the control of an untrained Matron and Master. The duties of the nurses will be defined still by an Order made in 1847, when a trained nurse was as rare as a black swan. Only one witness who came before the Committee ventured to propose such a backward step as this, and I earnestly trust Mr. Long will be strong enough to resist it. One reason for this backward step seems to have been that the Committee thought that a Superintendent Nurse would find no scope for her knowledge or powers in a small workhouse. But I would remind you that there is a trained Matron in every Cottage Hospital in England, and that many of these Cottage Hospitals have fewer beds than these small workhouse infirmaries.

I tell you, with some knowledge of nurses, that the main thing which militates against your getting into the Poor Law Service the best of nurses, and which makes their position intolerable when in it, is this putting a trained woman under an untrained Matron. The Irish are more wise and the Irish Order makes all nurses, and not only Superintendent Nurses, independent of the Matron and Master in matters connected with the nursing of the patients. "Because," as the Irish Order says, "it is most undesirable that even a nominal control over the sick wards should be in the hands of persons without training or qualification in the management of an infirmary or hospital."

If you want to encourage good women to enter the Poor Law Service, you must define their duties, improve their pay, their surroundings, their food and their conditions of service, and with a view of getting them to stay in the Poor Law Service, the Local

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