

THE BRITISH JOURNAL OF NURSING

WITH WHICH IS INCORPORATED
THE NURSING RECORD
EDITED BY MRS BEDFORD FENWICK

No. 799.

SATURDAY, JULY 25, 1903.

Vol. XXXI.

Editorial.

THE NATIONAL HEALTH.

One of the greatest statesmen of modern times crystallised the work and chief object of the medical profession when he repeated the ancient aphorism that the health of the people is the highest law, and, therefore, the first duty of the State. What is termed the degeneracy of the race is at present engaging the attention of various public bodies and of an influential section of the Press. The London School Board, for example, has recently published two reports; the first upon under-fed children, and the second, by the Medical Officer of the Board, upon the physical condition of the children who are under its care. Those reports demand, and it is to be hoped they will receive, the careful attention, not only of the London School Board, but also of the public at large, and they have an important bearing on the work of district nurses, to which attention may well be drawn in these columns. Briefly, the reports show that last winter 22,000 children who were attending Board Schools had to be provided with free meals; these in some cases being given for twenty-three weeks. It was pointed out some years ago that it was both useless and ridiculous to expect children who were starved in their bodies to be able to imbibe any mental instruction; and therefore it was wisely decided that such children, whom the State compels to attend at school, should also receive some bodily nourishment at the same time as they obtain educational advantages. But it is a matter of the most serious importance to the whole community that such a large number and proportion of the children of the richest city in the world should thus be proved to be always on the verge of starvation. And the fact supplies not only a startling commentary on the overcrowding of this great city, and the most forcible illustration of the struggle for existence, which seems to be intensifying every year; but it also explains the reason for the physical degeneration of the children

pointed out in the medical officer's report. For example, he states that 10 per cent. of the children of all ages have defective eyesight; that 10 per cent. have defects in hearing; that about 1 per cent. of these have affections of the ears which, if neglected, will probably produce fatal results; and that there are so many feeble-minded children, as distinct from imbeciles or lunatics, that special classes have been opened for them in sixty-one centres. These facts will doubtless impress medical men and nurses even more than they will impress the public. They mean, of course, that the children of the lower classes, at least in London, are distinctly degenerating from a physical point of view, and that such degeneration means a constant and increasing source of danger to the future welfare of the race. It means, of course, that these children are being directly and indirectly poisoned from their birth, weakened in their physical powers, not only by insufficient food, but by improper diet; and directly poisoned by bad air, poisoned by bad water, poisoned by dirt, poisoned by disease—one and all being due, in the great majority of instances, to the overcrowding and insanitary homes in which they are born, and in which they have to live and move and have their being. It is the duty of the State to realise that these conditions not only mean the ready diffusion of disease amongst the present population, but that they also involve increasing degeneration of the race in future. It is hopeless to expect any permanent improvement until the law compels the dwelling places of the poorer classes to be made fit habitations for human beings.

But until such reforms can be effected, district nurses can do something to alleviate the present injury to the children. They can be in the highest sense of the word Health Missionaries; and, going as they do into the districts which are now most overcrowded and unhealthy, they can perform a work of the utmost benefit to the whole community by impressing on the poor the superlative necessity of cleanliness and of fresh air for the children.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)