

The Select Committee on Nursing.

Thursday, May 11th.

MRS. BEDFORD FENWICK'S EVIDENCE.

The Select Committee on Nursing took evidence for the first time after the Easter Recess on Thursday, 11th inst., at 11.30 a.m., when there were present Mr. E. J. Tennant (in the chair), Lord Morpeth, Sir John Stirling Maxwell, Major Balfour, Mr. C. Douglas, Mr. Mount, Mr. Pierpoint, Mr. Charles Hobhouse, Dr. Ambrose, and Dr. Hutchinson.

Great interest was shown in the proceedings, many of those present being only able to find standing room.

The first witness called was Mrs. Bedford Fenwick.

The Chairman said that the Committee had already received much evidence, and did not desire to go over the ground already traversed by previous witnesses, but they were naturally anxious to hear what she had to say.

Mrs. Fenwick said that in the abstract she agreed with the evidence given by Miss Isla Stewart, Miss Huxley, and Miss Forrest, and that since 1887 she had taken great interest in the organisation of nursing, and in that year initiated the British Nurses' Association for the purpose of associating nurses together for their mutual benefit and to provide for their Registration, so as to raise and firmly establish the standard of the Nursing Profession as a whole. Since that date nurses all over the world had formed themselves into associations for professional purposes, by means of which they have been able to obtain more thorough instruction, and to materially increase their efficiency.

Mrs. Fenwick then showed that the Registration of Trained Nurses was enforced at the Cape of Good Hope in 1891, in Natal in 1899, in New Zealand in 1901, while in 1903 by the Public Health Act of New Zealand all Nursing Homes in the Colony were compelled to be registered by the Public Health Department. The witness further stated that the movement in favour of Registration in Australia was very strong, and it was probable that the Commonwealth would pass an Act for the purpose. In America eight States had already passed Acts for Registering Nurses, and many others were actively considering the question.

Mrs. Fenwick here handed in copies of various Bills, and a Schedule of the Acts already in operation, together with a statement from Mrs. Neill, the Deputy Registrar of New Zealand.

In a general statement the witness said that the consideration of the question of State Registration compelled attention to educational standards, and claimed that the education of a nurse should be based on sound principles; further, that the great development of medical and surgical science necessitates a rising standard of nursing.

She emphatically dissented from the suggestion made by previous witnesses that a thorough basis of nursing education would be likely in a nurse's estimation to enhance the value of her theoretical knowledge and depreciate her appreciation of the need for practical efficiency. In her opinion the exact opposite would result, as a Central Board of experienced medical and nursing experts would certainly lay emphasis on the practical efficiency of a nurse and so produce a better practical worker than is assured at present.

At present Matrons did not necessarily possess teaching experience or capacity, and it was the lack of an educational standard for Matrons which was really at the root of the disorganised condition of nursing throughout the country. The same lack of standard was apparent in the appointment of Sisters of hospital wards. These officers, even if good nurses, had to afford no evidence that they possessed the capacity to impart knowledge to others.

Although the hospitals had established schools of nursing, they had not instituted any graduated curriculum for the various classes of officers. There was therefore at present one dead level of mediocrity in the nursing world.

What the witness and others desired was the definition by a Central Board, constituted by Act of Parliament, of the minimum standard which it was necessary a woman should attain before she could with safety to the public be allowed to describe herself as a trained nurse. There would then be a basis upon which to work. This would be one of the main benefits resulting from the State Registration of Trained Nurses. For the effecting of any efficient system of organisation the body charged with this duty must have behind it the power and authority of the law. The witness considered that the standardisation of Nursing Education by a Central Board would have an immediate and most stimulating effect upon the practical work in hospital wards.

The curriculum having been defined, and a minimum standard instituted, nurses would be systematically taught on those lines in a thoroughly practical manner, and the examination would be merely a test of how they had assimilated the instruction received.

The present lack of standard, and the fact that on leaving the protection of her training-school a nurse found herself competing on equal terms with nurses with little or no training or experience, had had a very discouraging effect on the very type of woman it was most desirable to attract into the training-schools. There was a growing sense of injustice and injury in the minds of the best nurses, which could only be remedied by placing their work on a sound basis, thus ensuring them an honourable position in the estimation of the public.

The witness said further:—

"Much stress has been laid by former witnesses upon the necessity for the supervision and control of trained nurses, and, in fact, a modified system of ticket-of-leave has been advocated by the Matron of one hospital.

"I should like to emphasise the fact that the question of justice to nurses as a class should also receive due consideration.

"Only those who like myself have been intimately connected with nursing work for nearly thirty years can estimate at their true value the reforms effected, sometimes under very discouraging circumstances, by the thousands of women who have taken part in raising the moral tone and the practical efficiency of the care of the sick in the wards of hospitals and infirmaries during that period. The sum total of self-sacrifice, devotion to duty, and powers of organisation which have been expended in this great social reform are inestimable, and leave the State under a debt of obligation to our nurses which it can only discharge by doing all in its power to organise their education and work, so that they may be qualified in the best manner for the performance of their duties.

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