

The Position of the Matron in Poor Law Infirmaries.*

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I feel very keenly the honour you have done me in requesting me to read a Paper on so important a subject, before so critical and capable an audience. There are many, I feel convinced, who would have done more justice to the subject, than I can hope to do; but no one can be more strongly convinced than I am of the need for a radical change in the position of the official who should be the head of the Nursing and domestic staff in our Poor Law Infirmaries.

One of our most distinguished modern philosophers has a great desire to see a collection made of all the laws that have ever been framed—in any age or clime, dead and forgotten or alive and working—and to tabulate them with the reason for their enactment and their subsequent repeal. All those laws and rules and regulations that the passion or ingenuity of man has devised for the management of his fellowmen—laws like the Commandments of the decalogue that underlie all good government and social order—and those which have striven to stretch or cut down all humanity to one uniform height—or rules framed to meet some passing need which remained for centuries a mere stumbling block and hindrance to the progress of later generations, until they were indignantly swept away. They would form a large but instructive record of the mutability of human knowledge and foresight. For men grow and change, and their institutions must grow and change with them unless they would decay; they require shaping, pruning and altering; they must develop to suit the advanced development of the descendants of their founders. *Qui non proficit, deficit.* We can't stand still.

Now, amongst those laws that require most certainly to reproduce the spirit of the age, for whose use they are intended, must emphatically be classed those that deal with Poor Law Administration—we legislate for nineteenth, not sixteenth century pauperism.

We know that the laws enacted in Elizabeth's reign, that formed the basis of our Poor Law Administration until a time within the memory of man, were wise and just in their way; but that they developed such crying abuses and evils that modern progress intervened, with a strong hand swept them aside, and a strong central government had to force the Guardians of the Poor—the Almoners of the Nation, as Bushim calls them—to see that even the lowest and most poverty-stricken wretch received humane and considerate treatment, and justice tempered with mercy.

With immense patience and wisdom, the Local Government Board has brought the care of the pauper sick on a level with modern requirements. It enforced the building of our State Hospitals, those large well-appointed, well-founded Poor Law Infirmaries, of which any city or nation might be proud; it improved the care bestowed on the sick individually; it ordered resident competent medical men; it discouraged the use of pauper help in Nursing, with the many abuses it entailed; it encourages now the engagement of trained Nurses as the paid attendants on the sick; and, lastly, it has urged on Boards of Guardians the advisability of appointing gentlewomen, trained Nurses possessing professional knowledge and experience in Hospital management, as Matrons.

But all this has not been done in a day or a week. It is a long step from the lying-in ward of Dicken's "Oliver Twist," with the grim hag in attendance, to the trim Infirmary ward with its trained Nurses and Probationers of to-day. And it has been necessary to alter and compromise rules and regulations for the Nursing Staff (as any Infirmary Matron will tell you) to suit advancing views. Better accommodation, better treatment, the training of that self-respect without which we all sink, have been needful. Much has been done, much yet remains to do, and of all the laws which stand in need of revision, none more thoroughly blocks the way to further improvement in the Nursing Staff of Infirmaries than that which regulates the position and work of the Matron.

When the Local Government Board Act, by which the Matron's position in Infirmaries is regulated, was passed, trained Matrons were an unknown quantity; of Nursing proper, even as it was beginning to be understood in Hospitals, there was absolutely none. Some of the better Infirmaries had a few paid attendants to control the pauper help, the majority depended entirely upon paupers for their so-called Nursing; the Matron was frequently some subordinate Poor Law official who had risen from the ranks, quite without training, often with hardly any education—all the women in the establishment were practically drawn from the same class; the Medical Superintendent was really the only person of education or training in the place, and in his hands, therefore, the Local Government Board laid the supreme control of all officers, servants and patients.

I will read to you an abstract from those Articles in the Local Government Board Orders which define more precisely his position and that of the Matron with regard to the nursing and female staff generally:—

Article 42 distinctly states that the duties of the Medical Officer are, "to govern and control all the officers, assistants and servants in the Infirmary

* Being a Paper read before the Matrons' Council on Jan. 17th, 1895.

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