

The Conference of Poor Law Guardians.

THE Central Conference of Poor Law Guardians was held at the Guildhall on Thursday and Friday last week, and the proceedings were of a most animated description. The beautiful Council Chamber was well filled with Guardians from all parts of the country, who listened with keen attention to the papers read, and speedily showed their approval, or disapproval of the speakers who took part in the subsequent discussions.

The most interesting papers from a nursing point of view were those on the afternoon of Thursday 16th, when Miss Wilkie, Lady Superintendent of the Halifax Workhouse Infirmary, read a most able and valuable paper which we have great pleasure in reprinting, on "The Best Means of Providing and Training Nurses for the Indoor Poor," and this was followed by one on the same subject by Dr. Blake Maurice, F.R.C.S., Guardian and late Medical Officer of the Marlborough Union.

DISCUSSION.

In the discussion which followed, Lady Baker spoke of her experience of country nursing in connection with the Dorset County Nursing Association, of which she is Hon. Secretary. For five or six years she said she had been wrestling with the question of finding suitable nurses. The conclusion she had come to was that two grades of nurses were needed. The highly-skilled nurse was needed, so was also the second class, humble cottage, district, and infirmary nurse. She had brought down to the country admirable and skilled nurses, and she had felt as if she were using a razor to chop a block of wood. She thought these highly skilled nurses were fitted to take the head, and to nurse special cases, but that less advanced women were needed to nurse under them. She then suggested that scholarships should be given for nursing, under the Technical Educational Act, and said, that she had found this plan to work well.

Dr. Rhodes of the Chorlton Union thought that the question was one of supply and demand, and the remedy in the hands of Boards of Guardians.

A member of the Board of the Mile End Infirmary stated that 10 years ago that Board had come to the conclusion that they must do something, and had started a training school. At the present time the Matron of the School was a highly-skilled nurse, who had obtained her training in the Infirmary.

Sir Edmund Verney caused a sensation by announcing that in order to ascertain whether it were really difficult to obtain nurses for the smaller workhouses or not, he had inserted an advertisement in the press as follows:—

"Nurse trained and certificated wanted for small Workhouse Infirmary. Must be under 35 years of age. Good salary, comfortable accommodation, excellent food, and work not excessive."

To this he had received twenty answers by the first post, which he handed to the chairman.

This action was subsequently condemned, both by the chairman and another speaker, and rightly so, as

the twenty nurses are presumably still waiting to know if their applications are successful.

Councillor Askew, from Sculcoates, deprecated the idea of second-grade nurses. He thought the Poor Law needed the best. He also thought that more strength of action was needed on the part of the Local Government Board to bring nursing work up to date. Guardians were sometimes apt to consider that they were Guardians not of the poor, but of the poor rates.

The Rev. Henry Taylor, of the St. Albans' Board, spoke of the danger of Guardians lending their influence to the unnecessary increase of officialism, but even a greater evil was the neglect of the poor. The Local Government Board had called the attention of his board to the fact that wardsmen, and women, were nursing the sick. He found that on the men's side, the wardsmen were two partially convalescent delirium tremens cases, a locomotor ataxy patient, and a man with only one arm. On the female side, the wardswomen were a religious maniac, a dotty imbecile, and a woman who walked on crutches.

A member of the Norwich Board supported the Norwich petition, and instanced the improvement in education since the Education Act of 1876, and the establishment of a definite standard for teachers.

Miss Baker, P. L. G., London, said this was the tenth Conference she had attended, and she has never heard a paper which had given her so much pleasure as that read by Miss Wilkie. She further strongly deprecated the idea of second-grade nurses, the result would be that they would shortly go out as private nurses, taking £2 2s. a week, and compete with fully-trained nurses. She felt that as a public body, Guardians had no right to flood the country with semi-trained nurses. Years ago the Metropolitan Asylums Board found a difficulty in obtaining qualified nurses. Now that was all changed. They got trained Matrons, and they found that the nurses followed. Trained women objected to working under untrained heads, and, in workhouse infirmaries, of reporting details concerning their patients not only to the Matron, but perhaps to the Master also, if the Matron were off duty.

A lady Guardian from West Ham also condemned the two grades of nurses; she had no belief in a lower grade. She thought the hands of Guardians would be materially strengthened if the Local Government Board definitely forbid the employment of pauper assistance.

The Rev. Hart-Davis, of Henley-on-Thames, advocated Central Infirmaries for Country Unions as a means of meeting the nursing difficulty.

A lady Guardian spoke of the need of giving good certificates, and said that in the Infirmary with which she was connected the certificates were signed by the Matron, and were awarded according to her personal liking for the nurses. In our opinion, a most unjustifiable statement to make without proof.

A petition which should have great weight with the Local Government Board lay on the table for the signature of Guardians. It was worded as follows:—

"That the Central Committee be requested to organize a deputation to bring before the Local Government Board the serious difficulties which at present exist in connection with the supply of trained nurses for Workhouse Infirmaries, and Workhouse Sick Wards, and to ask the Board to take immediate steps for removing the difficulties complained of."

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