

## Is Nursing Really a Profession?\*

By A. WORCESTER, M.D.

Without attempting to define the much-abused word "profession," we can all agree that the practice of medicine is rightly so termed; and as the nurse's work is so closely associated with the physician's, let us compare her work with his to see if modern nursing is not also entitled to be ranked as a profession.

The profession of medicine is both an art and a science. Although of equal importance, medical science during the last half century has made such brilliant advances that the art of healing, curing, and comforting the sick and suffering has been too much neglected. Had it not been for the wonderful rise and progress of modern nursing during these same years this medical neglect would have been more glaring. And, even covered as it has been by the lovely assistance of our modern nurses, still this neglect has given warrant for the otherwise amazing growth of unscientific methods of healing and comforting.

A prominent physician told me the other day that henceforth he should devote his time exclusively to consulting practice. When I remarked that then he would be cut off from knowing his patients he replied that such was his desire, that he cared only for their diseases.

That at first sounds rather cold-blooded. But really it is not so. It is now necessary that some physicians shall be wholly devoted to medical science. And it is of direct advantage to the sick and suffering that those who are so devoted to the science shall not attempt to practise the art of medicine.

On the other hand, no advance of lasting good can come from those who attempt to heal and cure in defiant disregard of the knowledge God has given us. It is only by appropriating for the relief of the patient each successive discovery that the art of medicine can hope to keep pace with medical science.

The profession of nursing, like that of medicine, is an art dependent upon science; but in nursing, important as is the underlying science, the art must always predominate. In nursing there is no such chance as there is in medicine for devotion to pure science.

This essential difference between the two professions complicates the question we are now considering. Had the question been asked a third of a century ago, before the systematic training of nurses in this country was begun at the New England Hospital for Women and Children, there is no

doubt how it would have been answered. Nursing would then very rightly have been held to be only a trade. Not even the old-time nurses themselves would have claimed that it was anything more, and probably they would have also admitted that it was only a poor trade at that. Other trades could be learned by regular apprenticeship, but nursing had to be picked up in the hard school of experience. There were no teachers of nursing. There was not even a text-book upon the subject.

Women who aspired to be nurses had to depend upon their own wits and upon the chance information they might glean from patients and physicians. From the latter not much could be learned, for few doctors in those days knew much about nursing, and not many know much about it now. But from their patients who in previous sicknesses had been well nursed they could learn something. And, in spite of their pitifully few opportunities for learning, some of the old-time nurses certainly knew a great deal about nursing. Only those who were best fitted by nature and by personal trials undertook the work, and of such only the fittest survived. Nor was this true merely as regards physical strength, although only the iron-bodied could endure the deprivations and irregularities of living that the old nurses accepted as matter of course; it was also true as regards the higher qualities of tact, patience, tenderness, and devotion to duty.

Some few of them, no doubt, were Sairy Gamps, but many of them were splendid nurses. And it is a lasting loss that modern nurses, in their self-complacency, have learned so little from them. But the antipathy between the old-time and the modern nurses is not to be wondered at. Neither could understand the other. The old nurse was never ready either to learn or to teach. How could she be? For readiness to learn on her part would be an admission that she did not know everything, and to any such admission she was constitutionally opposed. Moreover, her capital in trade was her supposed peculiar knowledge of the art of nursing, which she was not fool enough to share with her rivals in business.

On the other hand, modern nurses have been so satisfied with their smattering knowledge of the underlying science of nursing that they too often have followed modern doctors in undervaluing the important art of caring for the sick and suffering. The old-time nurses were mistaken in despising the science, but the modern nurses have been even more foolish in missing their opportunities to learn more of the art of nursing. Many such opportunities are being lost.

The art of nursing is very old. Back through the ages it can be traced to that first district visiting nurse, Phœbe, whom Paul commended to the Romans for having been a succourer of many,

\* An address given at the graduation exercises of the Long Island Hospital Training School, Boston, June 12th, 1902.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)