

THE BRITISH JOURNAL OF NURSING

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

No. 771.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 10, 1903.

Vol. XXX.

Editorial.

THE INCREASE OF LUNACY.

The alarming increase of lunacy in the United Kingdom is calculated to impress all thoughtful persons with the necessity for dealing effectively with this disease.

Mental derangement is one of the most terrible, as it is also the saddest affliction with which humanity can be visited. Other serious diseases are as a rule well defined, and ensure the sympathy of others. But with mental disease it is far otherwise. The only symptoms, which are often undefined and insidious, may be that a lack of self-control or a change of personal characteristics may appear, alienating even the nearest and dearest of the sufferer, and thus increasing the symptoms, for no class of cases need more to be surrounded by an atmosphere of loving-kindness and tenderness, if the fact that the intentions of those about him are good, and not evil, is to penetrate the patient's beclouded brain.

A point in connection with it, which undoubtedly tends to its increase, is the exceeding reluctance of patients, or their friends, to seek treatment at an early stage, and thus incipient insanity remains untreated till it has passed the bounds of a curable disease, and only a prolonged period of detention in an asylum, which may even be life-long, remains to the victim. Moreover, in the eyes of most persons, a certain stigma is quite unjustly attached to anyone who has been an inmate of an asylum, and relatives hesitate to commit those they care for to these institutions. It is surely time that, if asylums for the insane we must have, their number should be much more limited than at present, while hospitals for the treatment of nervous and mental disorders should be largely increased. Only by such means, it appears to us, is it possible for the majority of cases of mental diseases to come under medical care at a stage when there is a reasonable hope that the treatment may be curative.

But the fact that so many persons are at present under no treatment in the incipient stages of insanity points to a very serious danger to the community at large—namely, that numbers of these persons undoubtedly marry, and transmit to their descendants an hereditary taint. How many of those with whom our daily intercourse brings us into contact, and whom we may regard, perhaps, as tiresome, or impossible, or unreasonable, are really persons needing medical care, on account of such a transmitted taint, we shall never know. But the extreme probability that their number is by no means small comes to us with increasing force as the years go by, as does also the need for the exercise of a large-hearted charity in this connection. None the less is it of urgent importance that the transmission of mental disease should be prevented, and a writer in the current issue of the *Westminster Review*, Mr. W. J. Corbet, M.R.I.A., maintains that the marriage of a person who is, or has been, insane should be prevented by law, and that the question is so important that an international conference should be called to consider it. The lunacy returns in Great Britain show that the matter is one of urgency, for while in 1859 the number of registered lunatics was 47,992, in 1902 it was no less than 148,631.

Points which also need to be raised in connection with the care of the insane are the abolition of private asylums, and the inspection of public asylums by qualified women as well as men. We are of opinion that the nursing of patients in those institutions should be inspected and reported on by inspectors who are trained nurses, experienced in the care of mental disorders. The more gross ill-treatment of patients in public asylums has now happily been abolished, but from the cases made public from time to time, and from well-authenticated evidence which reaches this office, we are of opinion that much still remains to be done before it can be asserted that the nursing of the insane in asylums is on a satisfactory footing.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)