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

No. 865. SATURDAY, OCTOBER 29, 1904. Vol. XXXIII.

Editorial.

THE PREVENTION OF MISERY.

"It would be far more important to work at the prevention of misery than to multiply places of refuge for the miserable."—DIDEROT.

Nurses whose work brings them constantly into contact with poverty cannot fail to be interested in its underlying causes, and in the remedies suggested for its cure or amelioration. The address recently delivered by Dr. Arthur Newsome (Medical Officer of Health for Brighton) at the inaugural meeting of the York Medical Society, on "Social Evolution and Public Health," contained some suggestive ideas both as to poverty and its remedies. "Poverty," said the lecturer, "was not usually a disease, but a symptom of disease, whether physical, intellectual, or moral. It was cruel, unscientific, and economically unsound to treat the symptom instead of the disease. Measures which directly or indirectly provided relief for able persons without exacting labour must be so stigmatised. They had again and again been known to depress wages, destroy character, and miserably prolong a condition of semi-starvation."

Speaking of the effect of poverty on public health, Dr. Newsome said that one of the most serious drawbacks to public health was the fact that a fraction of the community habitually had not enough to eat, and a still more numerous class lived habitually near the "poverty line," and on slight accident fell below it. He proceeded to show the food chosen by the people could yield much more nourishment for the amount expended upon it if attention were paid to securing the most nourishment for the money spent. This would be as much an addition to the food supply as the provision of so much extra food. Again, the lecturer contended that it is useless to teach only the theory and practice of food values and cookery; the habit of acting on them must also be taught, and this would be a costly process, involving some means of continuing the training of girls after school age. But it would dispose of a large proportion of the semi-starvation that exists, and would be cheap at any price which it would cost. Habits were necessary to the formation of character, and national education at present provided little mechanism for the education of character—a fact which was a serious hindrance to public health.

Do not those who come in contact with the poorer classes know well that many of them, though hard-working enough, have no idea of thrift, and that it is this which to a large extent keeps them poor? How rare it is to find a charwoman who does not smash crockery, spoil saucepans from sheer carelessness, and who uses anything which comes first to hand for any purpose whatsoever. In the same way the next generation are brought up. Children of three pay no more attention to maternal directions, entreaties, and threats than if they had never been uttered. Everything they cry for they have, though the family may be stinted of necessaries to buy unnecessary luxuries; quite young children are kept up till eleven o'clock at night, because they cry if they are put to bed. Is it to be wondered at if they grow up undisciplined, feckless, improvident members of society, helping to swell the classes under, or habitually near, the poverty line? Any money spent on inculcating habits of thrift and self-discipline would be money which would bring in a cent. per cent. interest to the national exchequer.

An interesting suggestion thrown out by the lecturer was that an almost untried means of self-help was the reduction of the drink bill. He contended that it ought to be possible to debar persons from purchasing alcohol when their children had to receive relief which was not repaid. This could not be regarded as an arbitrary interference with liberty, but a condition put on the waiver of a debt. Many people would regard this suggestion, if it could be carried out, not only as the greatest kindness to his dependants, but also to the consumer of alcohol.

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