

An Open Letter to Mr. Sydney Holland.

DEAR SIR,—It is said that a man is known by his opinions. Let me be kind, and express the hope that you will be measured by your work—done in a spirit of rare enthusiasm for one of London's greatest hospitals.

As for your opinions—they are a mere accident. They predicate a knowledge of the nursing problem, which, although you are profoundly convinced you possess it, largely remains outside the area of your consciousness. You—and many another opponent of State Registration—look out from your little sheltered world and believe that all is well—or well enough. It is only given to a few to rise superior to their environment, and you are not one of them. "Great is the Goddess of propinquity."

It is not in the well-ordered surroundings of a leading hospital and nursing school that you will find the reasons which make State Registration a necessity. There are those who do not accept such surroundings as their ultimate horizon; but I expect you would class them as unrepresentative.

Of course, one so objective as yourself cannot realise the experiences of others: for you, the evil wrought by the sham nurse is too small an affair to call for drastic reform. The sham nurse interests you as little as the hypothetical inhabitant of Mars. And yet she exists—the woman whose only right to the title of trained nurse is that she was dismissed from some hospital for one of half-a-dozen reasons; the woman whose little store of well-paraded knowledge was obtained in some special hospital; the woman who has never been in a hospital at all, but has gained a meretricious smattering of nursing facts at the expense of odd patients. General practitioners know her only too well, and through their great Association they have expressed themselves in favour of Registration. Those who fight epidemics know her too, and in all the seven hundred fever hospitals of England it would be hard to find a dozen medical men or Matrons who do not hold the same view. Finally, the nurses who go out into the arena to fight for a living, find her competing with them, and the majority of private nurses are of the same opinion. The recent little comedy of a protest against Registration does not refute the last statement.

Why do you oppose Registration? You give reasons, of course, and later on I will refer to the chief one—such as it is. But at the moment I am thinking of your motive, since one always lies behind a policy. Can it be that you disapprove of those who are in the forefront of the movement in favour of Registration? Surely not! Again, are you afraid that the halo which is acquired by nurses who train at your school will lose its brightness if they share a register with others who have not the advantage of belonging to an institution presided over by you? That, too, is impossible to believe. It would be *esprit de corps* at its very worst—mere selfishness, tinctured by vanity.

On the whole, therefore, I must conclude that

your attitude towards Registration does not represent a policy, but is the outcome of what I am compelled to call, for want of a politer word—prejudice.

This brings me to your argument. Prejudice is not founded on reasoning, so that any argument put forward in support of it is bound to be disingenuous or trivial. It will be in keeping with the courteous intent of this letter, and with my opinion of you, if I call yours trivial.

You harp on the statement that Registration will not be a guarantee of character, or—after a time, at any rate—of efficiency. Now, do you really, at heart, believe in the soundness of this objection? You are, I assume, a practical man, and must know that this is an imperfect world, full of compromise; that, while we remain in it, we have to accept the relative in place of the absolute. No register—not even that of the medical profession—offers an absolute guarantee of character and efficiency. But such a register does imply that every person whose name appears on it has been duly trained for work and responsibility of a particular kind, and is in this sense no sham; and it also implies that the individual has not grossly transgressed the laws of the land. No amount of hair-splitting can disprove this relative value of a register. It is an obvious fact which explains the existence of the one for medical men. And so, also, the nurses' register would be merely a relative test, general in application, and therefore simple in use, by which all concerned—medical men, the public, and nurses themselves—could detect the genuine (not necessarily the perfect) nurse, as against the sham. As an alternative, it has been suggested that those who want a trained nurse—perhaps at a moment's notice—should make inquiries regarding her record. It is a proposal that is not helpful, but merely irritating to those who would have to make the inquiries. The time has passed when the selection of a nurse could be put on the same footing as the appointment of a housemaid.

I have said that your opinions are a mere accident, but you will gather from this letter that I attach considerable importance to them. This I am compelled to do, because, owing to your position as Chairman of a great hospital, and your known interest in nursing matters, they have much weight with those who have no chance—not even yours—of forming opinions of their own. In ending let me express the sincere hope that you may yet change your attitude. You are the protagonist among those who are opposing Registration, and in so far as Registration would safeguard the public, and remove from one of the highest and most respected callings its present element of mercenary deception, a grave responsibility rests on your shoulders. The change in your views will come when you realise that, in the wider world outside the walls of a hospital, the conditions as regards nursing are remotely different and immeasurably more complex. May the time come soon!

I am, dear Sir,
Yours, etc.,
X.

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