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Editorial.

THE CARE OF PRISONERS.

The need of trained nurses in prisons, and of some special instruction for warders and wardresses in the care of the mentally afflicted and feeble-minded, is apparent from the Report of the Commissioners of Prisons and the Directors of Convict Prisons, for the year ending March 31st, 1910, recently issued as a Blue Book, from which we learn that the number of prisoners certified insane in local prisons last year was 118—106 men and 12 women. The ratio of prisoners found to be insane on reception to the total number certified, is fairly stationary. Two points are evident in this Report: (1) the need for a better system of investigation of the mental condition of accused persons, in order to minimise the danger and scandal of sending persons who are certifiably insane to prison; and (2) the need for the education of prison officials in the symptoms of incipient and actual insanity, in order that prisoners suffering from mental derangement may not be regarded as refractory and punished for insubordination. The Medical Inspector points out that even with existing machinery much more might be done, if the practice were extended which is increasingly adopted in the larger centres, of remanding prisoners for the expert examination of the prison medical officer.

In the Metropolis, during the period under consideration, the mental condition of nearly 900 accused persons was medically investigated, and a considerable proportion of these were found to be certifiably insane. Further, all prisoners committed to Brixton and Holloway prisons, for trial at assizes and quarter sessions, are specially examined with regard to their mental condition, and

evidence thereon is furnished to the courts. As a result, the proportion of cases in metropolitan prisons in which insanity is not recognised until after the prisoner has been sentenced is far below the average for the country at large.

Thus Holloway is only responsible for 13 per cent. of the cases of insanity recognised after conviction. But over 60 per cent. of the women on remand who were reported as insane to courts of summary jurisdiction were so recognised at Holloway.

Besides the acutely insane, the prison population includes a proportion of feeble-minded, and, during the year reported on in the Blue Book now under discussion, 322 convicted prisoners were dealt with under the modified rules for prisoners so feeble-minded as to be unfit for ordinary penal discipline. It is hopeful sign that the Commissioners announce that, in compliance with the desire of the Secretary of State, they have submitted definite proposals for dealing with the feeble-minded offender, and they propose that the Home Secretary should be legally empowered to transfer mentally defective prisoners to special institutions, on medical certificate that they are unable to take ordinary care of themselves, and are likely to revert to crime on their discharge unless special means are taken for their supervision.

No one who has visited one of our great metropolitan prisons, with eyes trained to see, can fail to realise that the problem of the criminal classes is one which must be solved by the medical as well as the legal profession. Written large on many of the faces is a history of mental instability, of feeble-mindedness, of disease, of chronic alcoholism, demanding restraint and treatment under medical supervision and nursing

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