

THE BRITISH JOURNAL OF NURSING

WITH WHICH IS INCORPORATED
THE NURSING RECORD

EDITED BY MRS BEDFORD FENWICK

No. 1,196.

SATURDAY, MARCH 4, 1911.

XLVI.

Editorial.

THE PROBLEM OF THE FEEBLE MINDED.

The problem of the feeble minded, concerning which Sir William Chance, Chairman of the Central Committee of Poor Law Conferences, presented a paper, to which we refer in another column, at the Guildhall last week, is most important, and one in which the future health and efficiency of the nation are involved. Sir William Chance showed (1) That a really feeble-minded child will always remain feeble minded, (2) that feeble-mindedness is hereditary, (3) that 62.6 per cent of the inmates of homes for chronic inebriates, 10 per cent of prisoners, and over 30 per cent of the inmates of rescue homes are feeble-minded, and (4) that the class constitutes a considerable section of the unemployed.

The Royal Commission on the Feeble-minded reported that "there are numbers of mentally defective persons whose training is neglected, over whom no sufficient control is exercised, and whose wayward and irresponsible lives are productive of crime and misery, of much injury and mischief to themselves and others, and of much continuous expenditure wasteful to the community and to individual families." Even if special education is available for a limited section of mentally defective children, "it is supplemented by no subsequent supervision and control, and is in consequence often misdirected and unserviceable." Saddest of all perhaps is the Commission's statement. "We find large numbers of persons who are committed to prison for repeated offences, which, being the manifestation of a permanent defect of mind, there is no hope of repressing, much less of stopping, by short, punitive sentences." Surely we are not far advanced

in civilisation when we deal with defects of mind by punitive imprisonment. Again there are at large in the population "many mentally defective persons, adults, young persons, and children, who are, some in one way, some in another, incapable of self-control, and who are therefore exposed to constant moral dangers themselves, and become a source of lasting injury to the community."

All this has been made public in the Report of the Royal Commission, but it is not sufficient to know that these things exist, it is the duty of every person who is not feeble minded to see that the question is dealt with effectively.

The Commission suggest that there shall be one Central Authority for controlling every class of mental defectives. The Asylum Committees of County Councils have charge at present of lunatics, idiots, and imbeciles, and they consider that the feeble-minded and epileptics might well be added. They are led to this conclusion because they consider that "the mental condition of these persons—and neither their poverty nor their crime—is the real ground of their claim for help from the State."

Sir William Chance rightly points out that compulsory powers are needed to deal with the classes above referred to, and asks "Is it not almost hypocritical to talk of the 'Liberty of the Subject' in this connection? It is an abuse of the expression to apply it to them. Yet this is an objection raised by members of the House of Commons, who are engaged every Session in passing legislation interfering with the liberty of sane people, who are generally judged capable of looking after their own affairs."

Nurses can do much to help to form public opinion, and they should lose no opportunity of pointing out the urgency for legislation in regard to the feeble-minded.

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