

THE HOURS OF ASYLUM ATTENDANTS.

One of the points mentioned by the Select Committee on the Asylums Officers Bill in regard to the hours of Asylum attendants is that "leave off duty has to be distinguished from permission to leave the asylum, though some attendants claim that unless they are absolutely free to leave the asylum they must be regarded as employed. Generally, the day staff are allowed out on some, or all, of the days of the week between 8 p.m. and 10 p.m., after the night staff have come on duty, but a certain number may have to be detained in the asylum as reserve staff, to form part of the fire brigade perhaps, or to serve during entertainments. The staff so detained may be left absolutely free from any actual asylum work, merely available in case of emergency. Such period of detention is sometimes counted as falling in the hours of duty, but the practice varies."

We may point out that if the "leave off duty" of asylum nurses and attendants is arranged from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m., for many months in the year it is taken after dark, when the same benefit is not gained as if it is enjoyed in the sunlight. Moreover, in the neighbourhood of asylums there are usually few incentives to go out at that time, as walks in the dark are not attractive and few other means of recreation are possible. Further, after a fourteen hours' day on duty the nurse or attendant is often too footsore and weary to contemplate a constitutional with any pleasure.

Another point justly emphasised by the Committee is that "No one will deny the special stress and strain of asylum service. It may be admitted that some part of the work—walking out with quiet patients, for example, or joining in games and entertainments with them—may be neither physically arduous nor even exacting, except for the element of the incalculable in dealing with the mentally deranged. But there is the atmosphere of lunacy all the time. Much of the work is tedious, monotonous, wearing, not free from indignities and some personal risk; and even fifty hours a week spent in the charge of the acutely ill, or of dangerous, suicidal or troublesome patients, or in hospital-nursing of a repulsive type, or in looking after idiots or the infirm and senile, may well constitute an excessive strain. The work calls for sympathy, tact, patience, and intelligence of a high order. In the interest of the patients, what can reasonably be done to counteract the irksomeness of the work should

not be ignored. Pensions under fair conditions, and reasonable hours of duty, are needed to attract as good a class of nurse and attendant as can be secured.

"On this head the Lunacy Commission in 1906 inquired into the number of attendants and nurses who in the previous five years were known to have suffered from lunacy. They found that in that period fifty-two attendants had been affected, twenty-three of whom were male attendants and twenty-nine nurses. Their Report for 1907, page 26, remarks as follows:—

"Taking 10,100 as the average number of attendants and nurses employed in asylums in a year, the proportion of those who become insane works out at 0.1 per cent., a figure which is little, if at all, in excess of the percentage of insanity to be met with in the general population between the ages of 20 and 54, and which would at first sight lead to the conclusion that attendance upon the insane does not lead to greater liability to breakdown. But it must be remembered that attendants and nurses are specially selected for their mental and physical fitness, and should therefore, under ordinary circumstances, show a lower proportion of mental breakdowns, also that the returns take no cognizance of those cases of temporary mental breakdown, not amounting to actual insanity, which not unfrequently occur among asylum attendants, which are brought about by the nature of the work and render them unfit to continue in it."

It is quite certain that no kind of nursing is so severe a strain upon conscientious and sympathetic men and women as that of the insane, and as these are just the type whose work is essential in the interests of the patients, it is most important to guard against over-strain by arranging for reasonable hours of duty. Humanity and commonsense alike also contra-indicate that the health of one section of the community should be broken down in the endeavour to restore another section to health.

Miss Louisa Twining, writing in "Workhouses and Pauperism," says: "I must say something more as to the strong objections we women guardians felt as to the evening hours for the nurses, who are almost all quite young, and from the country, so the plea that they could only visit their friends and relations at that time was contradicted by the fact that they had none living within reach. Where could they spend the hours from 8 to 10 in winter and bad weather? Besides this, they only got exercise in daylight or sunshine on their weekly half days."

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)