

THE ASYLUMS OFFICERS BILL.

THE SELECT COMMITTEE'S REPORT.

The Report and Special Report from the Select Committee on the Asylums Officers (Employment, Pensions and Superannuation) Bill are now printed in Blue Book form, together with the Proceedings of the Committee, the Minutes of Evidence, and Appendices, and may be obtained from Wyman & Sons, Ltd., Fetter Lane, E.C., price 1s. 6d.

We have already reviewed the Report and Special Report at some length, and will, therefore, only say, in relation to them, that it is a triumph for Lord Wolmer, who introduced the Bill into the House of Commons, that the Select Committee should have reported that they have carefully considered the Bill, and "are of opinion that, as amended by them, it should be proceeded with, in order that it may pass into law." The lot of asylum attendants is a hard one, in regard to conditions of employment, pensions and superannuation, and, although the latter were secured by the Act of 1909, and some Visiting Committees have urged that it is premature to amend it, the Select Committee "do not agree with this view, flaws and difficulties in the Act have already appeared, and amendments are suggested by more than one Government Department."

It will be remembered that the Chairman of the Committee was Mr. Charles Roberts, M.P., and that twenty witnesses, whose evidence it is our purpose to discuss in some detail in this and succeeding articles, were examined. It is interesting to analyse in the first place the positions held by the various witnesses, and to note the Government Departments and public bodies represented. The witnesses included representatives of the Lunacy Commission, the Home Office, the Asylums Committee of the London County Council, the County Councils Association, the General Board of Lunacy for Scotland, six out of seven of the Royal Asylums of Scotland, and the Scottish Members of the Medico-Psychological Association, the Lanark District Lunacy Board, the Asylum Workers' Association (which was responsible for the principal Act of 1909), the National Asylum Workers' Union (which practically drafted Lord Wolmer's Bill), and the Irish Division of the Asylum Workers' Association; an official in the National Debt Office, who is also a Fellow of the Institute of Actuaries, attended to give the Committee actuarial assistance; and the remaining witnesses were four medical superintendents, two matrons of asylums for the insane, one charge attendant, and one attendant and one house steward.

It should be borne in mind that the Bill, which was considered by the Select Committee, has two main divisions; it (1) restricts the hours of duty of nurses and attendants; and (2) amends the provisions of the Asylums Officers Superannuation Act, 1909, with a view to securing better terms of pension for the staff in asylums.

The need for legislation in regard to the hours

of asylum nurses and attendants, which is an entirely new feature in the Bill, which otherwise is an amending one, was abundantly proved in the course of the evidence, although the trend of the evidence undoubtedly showed official contentment with present conditions, and the view was expressed that State interference was unnecessary; that there was practically no demand for shorter hours on the part of asylum attendants; that they would not know what to do with them if they had them; and so forth. When nurses work for 85½ solid hours a week, exclusive of meals, and as in the extreme instance of the Paisley District Asylum at Riccarton, we imagine they have little time in which to make organised protest against their conditions of labour, and certainly meal-times afford little opportunity, for in the course of the day they are allowed half an hour for dinner, a quarter of an hour for breakfast, and the same time for tea! It is proof of the salutary effect of the proposals in Lord Wolmer's Bill, that already the question of the reduction of the hours of work in this institution is being dealt with by a sub-committee, which has recommended a 72 hours' week as the basis of re-organisation. Questioned by the Chairman of the Select Committee, as to when the Board began to think about a reduction of hours, Mr. George Pirie, Superintendent of the Asylum, replied, "When this question came up"; so that the fact of the introduction of the Bill has caused the Board of at least one asylum to realise that it is unjustifiable to work attendants on the insane for nearly 90 hours a week.

The points concerning which the Committee mainly addressed their questions to the witnesses were the statutory restriction of hours of duty proposed in the Bill, and the method of enforcement; the period of service; and age of the nurse or attendant which should entitle to a pension; and the practice of summary dismissal by Medical Superintendents; and it is evident that now that dismissal may involve loss of pension rights, it can, in future, be resorted to only in the very gravest offences.

It is apparent from the evidence received by the Committee that the appointment and dismissal of officers and servants in asylums is vested in the Visiting Committee. In England, while the London County Council follows this procedure, giving the Medical Superintendent power of suspension only, in a number of provincial asylums this power has been delegated to them. In Scotland it appears that the Medical Superintendents possess, and universally exercise, the power to summarily dismiss employees as they think fit, and witnesses strongly urged the desirability of the practice in the interests of discipline. In Ireland the Medical Superintendents have the power of suspension only. The Select Committee, we think rightly, consider that the practice contemplated by the Lunacy Act, that the power of dismissal should be retained in the hands of the Visiting Committee, ought to be universal.

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