

maintain herself. Here underfeeding inevitably comes in as a factor in the consequent overstrain, as well as the lack of personal comfort, for this is unattainable on such a pittance. I say "comfort," but "necessities" would be the more appropriate word—for a cheerful fire, a warm bath, hot appetising food are among the necessities of life when, wet, footsore, and weary, a nurse returns home at the close of an anxious day's work; but, at the above rate of pay, she must either get them for herself or for the most part go without, as her income will not admit of the luxury of attendance.

Mental nursing has its own special form of strain, caused by constant contact with the insane, and the need for unceasing watchfulness lest the patient should harm himself or attack those about him.

Again, there is the strain on a sensitive, sympathetic woman of contact with the tragedies of the under side of life, of the knowledge of conditions of life which make purity, and even decency, well-nigh impossible. Who is the more to blame when young men and young women lodgers are accommodated in the same room—because of the exorbitant rent demanded by the slum landlord—when the illegitimate child is born, the parents or the landlord? How can such conditions be remedied? How can preventable diseases, such as syphilis, be eradicated, and every child ensured its right to clean birth? The thoughtful nurse is brought right up against these and many kindred problems, and feels the consequent strain. True, the one who goes through the daily routine oblivious to these problems, unconcerned with them, escapes this particular form of strain, but she is not a nurse of the most desirable type. The need of the sick is for the care of human, tender, sympathetic women, not of machines.

Another form of overstrain—not to be justified, but still one which must be taken into account—is that caused by the attempt to nurse and lead an ordinary life of pleasure at the same time, to regard nursing as a means to an end—to put in so much time in hospital wards, or a sick room, while the real interests of life remain outside. Nursing is an exacting task-mistress, and inevitably and rightly avenges herself on those who attempt to depose her from her position as absolute monarch.

Unquestionably our duty is to guard against overstrain. A patient's first need is a nurse with freshness and vitality. Drowsiness, lack of alertness, tiredness, as a result of taking time for personal enjoyment from the hours allowed for sleep, are inexcusable, and indicate a want of conscientiousness which may show itself in other directions.

Further, nurses have a duty to themselves, and it is futile to insist upon the importance of the rules of hygiene to others and deliberately ignore them all oneself, although I admit, especially in these days of high pressure, that it is far easier to preach than to practise.

To sum up, it is our duty as nurses, in the stress of emergency, deliberately and willingly to risk overstrain. It is the duty of employers, public and private, to refrain from overtaxing the eager and willing worker, and to ensure that, under normal conditions, the work of nurses is so arranged that they have sufficient time for sleep and recreation, comfortable quarters, and good and appetising food. The possibilities and probabilities of overstrain are increased in countries where the nursing profession is unorganised, and therefore liable to be overworked and underpaid. Experience proves that with organisation, under State authority, comes increased recognition of the honourable and arduous nature of a nurse's work, better conditions of labour, more adequate remuneration, and therefore better service for the sick.

Lastly, we know that, for better, for worse, the nursing profession owns our whole-hearted allegiance, and that we would not exchange our chosen vocation for any other in the world.

A MOST GENEROUS GIFT.

The Treasurer of the International Council of Nurses has received the sum of one hundred dollars from "a Delegate from America to the recent Congress," with the proviso that a part of this money is to be devoted to payment for the translation of Dr. Hecker's paper on "The Overstrain of Nurses," the translation then to belong to the International Council of Nurses, to be used in any way which seems best, after consultation with the officers of the Council as to the way in which this valuable pamphlet can best be utilized in furthering its efforts to secure proper hours and conditions for nurses.

This most generous and welcome gift will enable Dr. Hecker's treatise to be circulated amongst English-speaking people. It will be specially welcomed by those nurses who were present on the memorable occasion of its delivery, but whose imperfect knowledge of the German language prevented them from following it with the close attention it deserved.

It is so rare for gifts to be made to promote objects for the real welfare of nurses that this one, coming from a member of the nursing profession, will be specially appreciated.

previous page

next page