

MENTAL NURSING.*

MADAM PRESIDENT AND LADIES,—

I am extremely glad to have this opportunity of speaking to you about mental nursing, for it is, to my mind, the highest form of nursing possible, and the most difficult, necessitating for its perfection the most various and exquisite qualities of mind—indeed, I may say of body too—and when successful bringing the acutest pleasure and satisfaction in its efficient performance. To be a good mental nurse is far more satisfactory than to succeed in any other branch of nursing, for the former can bring not only physical relief, but also peace of mind to her patient.

Mental nursing is going through a period of stress and strain even yet in the process of evolution into a highly trained profession. It is well known how the treatment of mental troubles has evolved during the last 50 years. It is superfluous to go back and describe the periods of barbarism when the insane were treated as though possessed by evil fiends—nay, more indeed as if they were devils themselves, and how they were rescued, very largely, by members of that most industrious and beneficent of Christian sects, the Quakers, or Friends, more praise to them!

But we are still far from having said the last word as to the treatment of the insane, both by doctors and nurses, and the reason why there is so much difficulty experienced in obtaining the best imaginable view of the subject is that the view is largely obscured by the legal necessities which are so closely bound up with all loss of control in the individual. (When society goes mad no notice is taken; only when the individual becomes insane.)

It is essential that there should be legal protection; it is also conceivable that it could be made more adaptable to the best interests of the patient by giving wider permissive powers to those who administer it with advantage to all, and this will no doubt be done in time, particularly if we know what we want clearly, and let the public realize it.

A Bill is at present drafted dealing with the lunacy laws in this country. In Scotland the law dealing with insanity is in advance of our own.

Meanwhile, it is idle to deny that mental nursing is not so popular, nor so well thought of (by the ignorant, let me hasten to say), as

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medical, and still more surgical nursing. The why and wherefore of this worship of surgery I have never been able to fathom, and, as it has been the subject of so many enthusiastic panegyrics, perhaps it may be only fair to record the opposite opinion that, as compared with mental nursing, it is as a maid in the kitchen to the housekeeper of a house. The one has to be quick, clean, deft, punctual, obedient; the other has to know the thoughts of the whole household, to be in the confidence of every member, to know who is likely to give notice, who is going to be out late, who has too much to do. And yet the maid will be a better one if she has the mental training to grasp the importance of mental phases. She will appreciate better the effect on some minds of discovering a caterpillar in the cauliflower, and the knowledge will impel her to care in this respect.

Surgery does not—except during a short space of possible delirium, rare in these days of aseptic operating—destroy the power of mental action and control. The human being is still *compos mentis*, and able more or less to help and inform his nurse. But in mental trouble the nurse has far more elaborate work before her. She has to persuade the mind, to gain the confidence to such a thorough extent, that not only will the patient take her dictum on surgical facts, but on all sorts of other facts and ideas which may present themselves to the mind. She has to know the things he does not tell her, the things he does not even know, and needs, to do it well, sympathetic understanding and insight far beyond that needed for any other kind of nursing. I claim that mental nursing is the highest form, because it requires all the most distinctively human qualities in their most perfect development.

The real reason at the root of the trouble with regard to the nursing—and, to be honest, let me add doctoring—of mental patients is that, owing to the legal necessities above mentioned, the nursing and doctoring is never done in the great teaching hospitals of London and the provinces, and it is my firm conviction that until this serious fault is remedied, there will always be an immensity of prejudice and ignorance to be overcome.

The consequence of this omission is that the rank-and-file of student doctors and nurses are never brought into contact with this particular form of illness at all. This exclusion of the vast series of mental illnesses from the regular courses of students and nurses is fraught with real and obvious danger to mental cases, not only from failure of recognition of the nature of the disease later on, but through defective training in the treatment of these cases when

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