

NURSING IN RURAL WORKHOUSES.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP?

In spite of the black fog there was a good attendance at the meeting held in the Committee Room of the National Union of Women Workers, Parliament Mansions, S.W., on Saturday last to discuss nursing in rural workhouses, when Miss James, P.L.G., presided, and Miss Jane Wilson and Miss A. C. Gibson were the speakers. Miss Wilson urged that to arouse the public it was necessary to keep the question ceaselessly before it.

She had visited many of the smaller unions, and, with the permission of the Guardians, slept in others. Some were quite unsuited for their purpose, and were a dreary refuge for the small number of aged and infirm who lived there surrounded by an atmosphere of repression and gloom, impregnated with the smell of boiling porridge, perchloride of lime, and soapsuds.

She remembered how deeply pleased she was to hear that a Royal Commission had been appointed in 1906 to inquire into the whole condition of the Poor Law in the three Kingdoms, but the result had been small, though the Commission did report that they considered that the country was not getting the results it should for the millions of money spent on the sick poor in Poor Law infirmaries. The speaker said that Guardians did not always realise what great powers they possessed and instanced the excellent results attained at the Birmingham Infirmary.

From the deliberations of the Royal Commission all that had come so far was the new Draft Order, at present confidential, although much of it had been published in the press. The Order was dangerous, and if left as it now stands a far worse state of things would come to pass in the rural workhouses than prevails even at present. It put the Superintendent Nurse under the Master, and in workhouses where there is no Superintendent Nurse delegated her duties to the Matron. Married couples were usually engaged as Master and Matron, and even the Local Government Board could not lay down that a Master must always marry a trained nurse.

Miss Wilson remarked that she was sorry to see an article in the *Times* of December 26th, 1912, a paper which had hitherto stood for what is big and fine, commending the Draft Order. The Order was a retrograde one, and its effect, if put into force, would be to discourage the best nurses from entering Poor Law nursing.

Miss Gibson pointed out that the able-bodied occupants of workhouses have largely decreased, and the sick increased. The opinion among nurses was too often that the sick poor in rural workhouses were a poor sort of persons, who got as much as they deserved. She emphasised the fact that many of the rural workhouses were often hospitals for the chronic, and sometimes

acutely sick poor of the locality, who during their years of work had been paid such low wages that they could not afford to save or even to take care of their health. Cases of rheumatoid arthritis which needed to be handled with the greatest care, and whose limbs were so tender that they dreaded to be touched, cases of cancer, &c. The deterrent effect of the Poor Law should not fall on these people, yet, in the new Draft Order there was no qualification at all for the nurses in small unions, none. It was a wicked and scandalous thing that these people should not be properly nursed.

If anything was to be done it must be done at once, for if public opinion could not be roused the Order would have to go through. The speaker strongly advocated the formation of a Nursing Department by the Local Government Board Office, with trained nurses upon it to deal with Poor Law nursing, a claim frequently put forward in this journal. So far as she knew, nursing authorities had not been consulted in drafting the Order. She hoped not, considering its import. She advised her hearers to concentrate on urging the absolute necessity of the formation of a Nursing Department at the Local Government Board. Some officials considered that if they were capable of performing their own duties they were capable of doing everyone else's also, but this was not the case.

As an example of the difficulty which might arise when the Matron of the workhouse overlooked the domestic affairs in the sick wards, Miss Gibson instanced a case where all the sheets sent down as dirty by the Superintendent Nurse were inspected by the Matron and returned to the wards if she did not consider them sufficiently soiled. The Matron did not know what influenced the Superintendent Nurse to send down the sheets, or what diseases the patients were suffering from who had been between them.

Miss E. C. Barton, President of the Poor Law Infirmary Matrons' Association, said that it had asked to be received by the Local Government Board in relation to this question, and she had presented the following memorandum in its name:

SIR,—I have to thank you for your courtesy in receiving us here to-day.

As an Association comprising nearly all the Matrons and Superintendent Nurses in the infirmaries recognized as Training Schools by the L.G.B., we beg to be allowed to make a few suggestions with reference to the alterations it is proposed to make under the new Draft Order in the position of the Superintendent Nurse.

1. In the interests of the sick it is essential that only those trained in a recognized school should be appointed as Superintendent Nurses.

2. That in Infirmaries having a minimum of 60 to 100 beds the Superintendent Nurse shall be directly responsible to the Medical Officer and Guardians, the Master being, as regards the sick wards, in the position of steward.

It is essential that the Superintendent Nurse have entire charge of the linen in her department; that she should present her own reports directly to the Committee; that she should interview all female candidates

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