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EDITORIAL.

THE SHORTAGE OF NURSES UNDER THE M.A.B.

The indispensable nature of the work of trained nurses received striking exemplification at the meeting of the Metropolitan Asylums Board on Saturday last, when the incidence of scarlet fever in London, and the inability of the Board to receive patients in the preceding weeks, solely in consequence of the impossibility of securing the requisite nursing staff of the lower grades, was considered.

Dr. Elliott Browne, Chairman of the Hospitals Committee, informed the Board that the committee had done everything possible to get nurses, but had failed. The immediate difficulty was being met to a certain extent by the engagement of institution nurses.

The public little realise the services rendered to them by trained nurses until for some reason those services are unavailable, when the risks run by the community in consequence are apparent. The diminution of scarlet fever in the metropolis, of recent years, has been undoubtedly due to the segregation of cases, as they arise, in the hospitals of the Metropolitan Asylums Board. But this segregation cannot take place unless a sufficient nursing staff can be engaged to attend to them day and night, and this the Hospitals Committee has been unable to secure. These highly infectious cases have therefore recently had to remain in their own homes, where, in many cases, effective isolation is impossible, at serious risk to their families and neighbours.

This failure of the supply of candidates as hospital probationers is a serious condition to which we have frequently drawn attention. It was brought to the notice of the Prime Minister by Miss Cox Davies when the Deputation from the Central Committee for the State Registration of Trained Nurses waited upon him in April last, and the President of the Local Government Board was questioned in the House of Commons concerning it, when he pledged himself to the statement that the

deficiency was only temporary, due to such causes as the National Insurance Act.

We were aware at the time that this did not represent the facts, and that the shortage would continue unless the nursing profession were put upon a defined basis under a legally constituted State Authority, and events have proved that it is even becoming more acute throughout the hospital world.

When there is not a sufficient supply of workers in any branch of labour, there is something wrong in the conditions of their employment.

There are several causes militating against the adoption of nursing as a profession by girls, in sufficient numbers. There are many openings at the present day more attractive to those who desire to become self-supporting.

The salaries, especially having regard to the responsible and dangerous nature of the work, are insufficient, especially taking into consideration the rising cost of living, although those offered by the Metropolitan Asylums Board, as well as the accommodation provided, compare most favourably with many others.

The nursing profession is in a state of evolution, and its organization as a whole under State authority is eventually inevitable. If the endeavour of far-seeing nurses twenty-five years ago to guide it into evolutionary channels had been sympathetically assisted, instead of determinedly prevented by those employing nurses, it would not have been in the undesirable and disorganized position in which it is to-day. The attempt to stamp out professional guidance has, as we predicted, had the most disastrous result.

We are glad to know that the Board is taking counsel with its Principal Medical Officer and Matrons, and that the former has been directed "to report at an early date on the existing terms and conditions of employment of the nursing staff at the Board's infectious hospitals, including hours of duty, amount of leave, &c., embodying any views he may have as to what variations are necessary to render the service more attractive."

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)