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EDITORIAL.

THE DANGERS OF FIRE.

A heavy responsibility imposed on those to whom the charge of the sick is entrusted, especially in institutions where numbers are congregated together, is their adequate protection from possible injury in the event of fire.

To the credit of nurses it may at once be said that when this emergency arises they show themselves prompt, resourceful and courageous in dealing with it, and loss of life from this cause is rare. But the appalling fire some years ago in an Asylum in greater London demonstrated what may happen when an outbreak of fire gets beyond control.

Just now the need for precaution should specially be borne in mind. We will leave out of consideration the possibility of fire caused by hostile aircraft, and consider other conditions under which an outbreak might easily become perilous to the patients in an institution.

In the first place we must remember that many buildings are being used just now, as hospitals, which were not designed for this purpose, and which have not the fire proof walls, the interior stone staircases, or the outside iron staircase, the fire escapes from the higher floors, and the fire hose laid on upon which in normal times we rely. If any one doubts it let him go to the nearest temporary hospital and make enquiries for himself.

Moreover, wood enters largely into the construction of many temporary hospitals, and while, it is true, it may be specially treated, to render it non-inflammable, it is scarcely likely this is always the case. A more sure ground of confidence is that these wooden huts rarely have upper storeys, and if the number of doors, or French windows, are adequate helpless patients can quickly be removed outside.

Another element of danger is that nurses who have ordinarily had instruction in fire drill and know their collective duties, and what each should perform, may be at sea if they do not know definitely what is expected of them, added to which there is a considerable element in many hospitals at present of unskilled women, whose presence, in case of fire, would be likely to be more embarrassing than useful.‡

The best way now, as always, to deal with the danger of fire is to prevent its occurrence, and with this end in view to keep a sharp look-out on all sources of possible danger. We will enumerate some of them and every nurse, from her own knowledge, can supply additional examples.

To begin in the kitchen—often in the basement—there is the danger of clothing becoming ignited through minor explosions in connection with gas stoves manipulated by those unfamiliar with them, the possibility of fusing of electric wires, and of their imperfect insulation, both of which sooner or later will cause fire.

Again, a saucepanful of fat intended for frying purposes, may boil over, catch fire, and in this ignited condition penetrate crevices and run behind skirting boards.

In the wards a steam-kettle, and the lamp filled with paraffin, which keeps it boiling, may be overturned, or a lamp filled with methylated spirit may explode. At Christmas time, cotton wool used in decorating may ignite, and its use for this purpose should be strictly prohibited, both on the ground of illegitimate waste of hospital property, and of danger to life in the event of its becoming ignited.

The duties of each nurse in the event of fire should be defined, and danger minimized by a wise distribution of patients, so that the helpless ones are for the most part in wards on the ground and lower floors.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)