

NATIONAL UNION OF TRAINED NURSES.

CONFERENCE TO DISCUSS PROPOSED
MINISTRY OF HEALTH.

A largely attended Conference, convened by the National Union of Trained Nurses, was held on Saturday, November 23rd, at the College of Ambulance, 3, Vere Street, W., to discuss the proposed Ministry of Health. In the unavoidable absence of the Rev. H. R. L. Sheppard, the Chair was taken by Miss M. Heather-Bigg, R.R.C., and the audience was evidence of the wisdom of the policy of consolidating the self-governing societies of nurses through affiliation with the Royal British Nurses' Association, and with the prestige conferred by its Royal Charter, for it included many members of these societies, as well as of the general public, which was well, for it is highly important that the public should hear the nurses' point of view on matters which vitally affect them.

The Conference was opened by a brilliant speech by Dr. C. W. Saleeby, who paid a high tribute to the work of the late Lord Rhondda at the Local Government Board in promoting a Bill for the establishment of a Ministry of Health, and said that the Bill introduced by Dr. Addison last Session was the product of much hard work. There was not a vested interest which had not been consulted, and there was not time to discuss the Bill in detail clause by clause before the end of the Session. It was important that the Bill should be introduced as early as possible next Session.

In essence the Bill was a small thing out of which, as such, nothing proceeds, but it was the germ of a good thing. Its aim was to get rid of our ridiculous muddling in Whitehall by co-ordinating in one department the health activities of a number of departments. Lord Rhondda had found fourteen Government Departments exercising control in this connection, but that was not final, and the Admiralty was now engaged in starting a maternity department. (Laughter.) The work must be done in a logical and coherent way.

The Ministry of Health was bound to be a feature in electioneering speeches, and candidates for Parliamentary honours were, said Dr. Saleeby, writing to him to know what it meant. He put the position thus. There is poverty in the world, and there are also great resources. The State ought to function as a Ministry of Health.

But it was possible to deal with the question so that the more help was supplied the more help would have to be given.

The foundations on which such a Department should be built were four square. They were—

To learn and to teach ;

To guard and to help.

1. *To learn.*—The Ministry must set out with the function of learning the facts of life and death, availing itself of medical learning and research, of demographic research, and must con-

tinuously observe the conditions affecting] the health of the people.

2. *To teach.*—The Ministry must be responsible for the teaching given on health subjects and must itself teach. On the whole, teaching in this country was very bad. North of the Tweed they were much in advance of England, where the virtues inculcated were pluck, luck and muddle through. A Ministry of Health should immediately raise the standard of education for the professions, including doctors, dentists, nurses and midwives.

It was not our way to put things in the hands of experts, and the fellow feeling of the Government made it tender to quackery of every description.

All who knew the difference between knowing their job and not knowing it must hold together, and exact that those employed under the Ministry of Health should be trained for their work. There might be geniuses, but even a heaven-sent nurse was improved by training, and the notion that amateurs were as good as experts was a pernicious one. All who had sat down and swatted, because it was the only thing to be done if they were to learn their work thoroughly, knew that it was simply monstrous.

But we had tradition south of the Tweed against us, and we should have hard work to secure the recognition of the expert, but we were right and we had got to win.

3. *To guard.*—It would be the duty of the Ministry of Health to guard the country against disease. It was for the most part born into our bodies by the channels which conveyed to them the necessaries of life, such as air, water and food ; all these were liable to convey disease. The Ministry of Health must prevent them from conveying the germs of disease.

4. *To help.*—There were cases, however, in which from the nature of the case help was required. The mother and infant were cases in point. It was monstrous that in England and Wales, 3,000 mothers should die annually from puerperal fever. The country of Lister and Florence Nightingale should not know the disease. But the deaths were not all ; there was also the damaged motherhood and damaged infancy. The need of the mother and infant was a biological law. They must have a special service. If ever knowledge were wanted it was wanted here. A highly qualified woman should be highly placed in the mother and baby department.

Dr. Saleeby also advocated the formation of a special department dealing with adolescence, which should include a section of recreation to teach the young—amongst other things—how to use their leisure without doing themselves damage, and how to avoid the racial poisons, such as venereal disease and alcohol. At present, the only people who studied recreation were those who knew how much money could be got out of it. If adolescence were to be protected recreation must be provided ; it was a physiological necessity.

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