

LABORATORY WORK FOR WOMEN.

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Some years ago, when in charge of a large hospital, it was my duty to examine candidates for the post of probationer nurse. The standard was high, because I did not accept anyone whom I thought would be likely to break down anywhere on training: consequently many, otherwise of excellent physique, were rejected on account of slightly deformed feet or varicose veins.

I have often wondered what became of these girls, many of whom must have had a natural aptitude for medical work of one kind or another, and it is a pity that they should be lost altogether to the profession. Nowadays, however, they need not be, and I think that the opening that awaits them in the laboratory is perhaps insufficiently realised. Let me, then, briefly describe the position, and then put in a plea for the pathologist who requires their services.

Until recently, pathology was a science of its own, and it got its facts mainly from the examination of tissues removed in the theatre and from the performance of post-mortem examinations; the pathologist himself was often a man without very much clinical inclination, and was, anyhow, concerned more with the advancement of science than with the treatment of the particular patient.

Small blame to him! The science he loved, however, gave him scarcely a living wage, and certainly led to no pecuniary or social advancement, and very seldom was he permitted to see the practical result of his work. So, many brilliant men were lost to science by being pitchforked into general practice by the force of circumstances.

Gradually, however, the barrier between the clinician and the pathologist was broken down, and a new department of clinical pathology came into being. By this I mean that the pathologist was called in during the life of the patient to find out what he could from examination of any material he could collect, instead of having simply to find out after death how the horse had been stolen! Of the value of this co-operation, the diagnosis of diphtheria and of phthisis by the detection of the characteristic microbes in the throat and sputum are good examples.

This child of the alliance grew apace, until the facilities for diagnosis afforded by the laboratory were demanded not only by the practising clinician, but even by his patient.

This necessitated a considerable increase both in the number of laboratories and in the staff which each employed.

Then came the war, and everybody knows how incalculable has been the value of laboratory work, not only in the treatment of the wounded, but also in the prevention of sickness which in former campaigns was more deadly than the weapons of the foe. On their return to civil practice many medical men now serving will demand the laboratory facilities which they have enjoyed in the field for all classes of their patients, and it is evident also that in any schemes for improvement of the national health research must find a place.

In the past, pathology has almost entirely been confined to men, though I have often thought—and taught—that this was unnecessary. Women are eminently fitted for pathological work, and nowadays they are taking to it in increasing numbers.

In a laboratory there are two classes of worker: the qualified pathologist, who has passed through the whole medical curriculum, and the technical assistant; it is the latter which we will now consider. What sort of life will the woman aspirant lead, and what advantages does the career hold out?

Well, in the first place she need not be physically robust; the hours of duty are not excessive, and she can sit or stand at her work at will. Consequently her night's rest is not broken by the cry of the aching back or the incipient flat foot.

Then she earns a living wage from the start, and at once begins to take a hand in the fascinating work of finding out what is wrong with the patient.

If she can afford it, there is distinct advantage in taking a preliminary course of instruction in Bacteriology and Chemistry at one of the teaching centres in London or elsewhere, but this is not essential, and she can start, if she prefers it, on the lowest rung of the ladder in the laboratory itself.

Probably she begins by spreading films of pus, sputa, and so on, and later on perhaps staining them for the pathologist to examine. At this stage she also learns something about microscopy itself.

Pathologists are often chatty souls, and in the intervals between one specimen, or batch, and the next, are usually keen on teaching. Generally they are also enthusiasts, and their reminiscences and day dreams are often fascinating.

Then she learns the gentle art of glass-blowing, and it is extraordinary how skilful many girls become at this in a very short time. It is

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