

THE OVERSTRAIN OF NURSES.

It is now upwards of six years ago (how time flies!) since, at the Great International Council of Nurses' Conference, held at Cologne in 1912, Dr. H. Hecker, of Strasburg, gave his wonderful Paper on "The Overstrain of Nurses," in which he showed the callous cruelty of the treatment of Nurses in Germany, and incidentally, in comparing their condition with those of the nurses of America and the United Kingdom, failed to realise, that we in Britain, were far behind the United States in nursing education and economic conditions, and that we also suffered from conditions conducive to overstrain. This being so, it has taken the experience of the Great War to bring home to our employers that conditions for nurses in this country must be improved, or the necessary supply will fall far short of the demand, and we welcome the action upon the part of the National Council of Women in setting up a representative Committee to inquire into the "Working Hours and Salaries of Trained Nurses." The question is to be approached from a neutral standpoint—but when reliable evidence is before the Committee, we hope it will make an effective report, and suggest feasible reforms.

For years before the war, the hospitals had been trying all they knew (in ignorance no doubt) to kill that goose which laid the golden egg containing first-class nursing material, and although it is not quite *non compos*, the egg is considerably addled!

To return to Dr. Hecker. So greatly was his sympathetic and scholarly Paper appreciated that it was translated by Gain Praetorius and Anita Becker, and published in English by the International Council.

It would appear worthy of careful study by those who are to work on the National Council of Women Committee, and may be obtained cost free from the office of the International Council, 431, Oxford Street, London, W., by post for 1½d. stamp.

THE OVERSTRAIN OF NURSES.

"What a sum of bodily and mental suffering, of distress and renunciation, of unfulfilled aspirations and broken-down existences," exclaims Dr. Hecker, "is contained in those few words!"

"Overstrain is a most important, if not the most important, question of the present day in regard to the weal and woe of nurses."

THE OPINION OF SCIENCE.

"In turning our attention to our special subject it might be advisable to make sure of the opinion of science—in this case, of physiology. We cannot do better than follow in its essential points the most trustworthy and interesting treatise by *Regierungs und Geheimer Medizinalrat* Doctor Roth in Potsdam: 'On the Physiology and Pathology of Work, with special regard to the question of Overstrain.' Hygienists, historians, and political economists agree that though in

many cases the working hours have been shortened, an increase of nervous tension, of a certain heightened excitability, is characteristic of our day. Free competition, with its necessary accompaniment of haste and speed, disgust and irritability, the rapid shifting of emotions, together with the spread of education, resulting in superficiality, have produced a state of increased nervous tension which is steadily becoming a national feature. Fatigue is the natural result of accomplished bodily or mental work. 'Over-fatigue' is the result of fatigue which has not been readjusted within the normal. Fatigue is physiological; over-fatigue is pathological.

THE RESULT OF FATIGUE.

The result of fatigue, especially of the neurone, of the nerves in their entirety, is a lowering of the limit of irritability (*Reizschwelle*), which, by gradual recuperation again returns to the normal. The more fatigue becomes over-fatigue, the deeper sinks the limit of irritability, and the longer lasts the return to the normal, the result being the development of so-called 'irritable weakness.' In consequence of bodily effort, specific substances are formed in the muscles. If these substances resulting from fatigue are injected into a non-fatigued muscle, the latter, without having performed any labour, immediately loses its efficiency. Parallel with the formation of substances resulting from fatigue is the consumption of bodily tissues, especially in the working muscles and fat, and this consumption (dissimilation or disunion) is greater than the building up (assimilation, restitution). This process has been called exhaustion, in contradistinction to fatigue, which simply means the formation of substances resulting from fatigue. From this consumption of bodily substance which accompanies bodily work, it is clear that, in spite of the restoration of the repeatedly irritated muscle by the removal of substances resulting from fatigue, nevertheless its efficiency is gradually lessened, and is finally lost. From the physiological point of view the following symptoms of fatigue are the most important, quickened and deeper breathing, quickening of the pulse, further rise of bodily temperature, and decrease of working power. Shortness of breath, showing itself as the result of severe bodily work, is not due to a change in the alternation of gases (*Gaswechsel*). On the contrary, in this case it is due to the specifically irritating effect of the substances due to fatigue on the circulating and breathing centres. Several investigators have succeeded in gaining a toxin from the muscle juice of fatigued guinea-pigs, and, by repeated intravenous injections of this toxin, in preparing a specific antitoxin with which active and passive experiments of rendering immune could be made.

Just as mental work depreciates the power of manual work, all manual work, when exceeding a certain limit, renders one also incapable of mental work. This is shown in the perception by the senses becoming slower and less exact. The

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