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EDITORIAL.

CLASSED AS PAUPERS.

The Barnet Board of Guardians are doing a most useful and public-spirited bit of work in urging modifications of the operation of the Poor Law in the case of the sick.

At their last meeting the Guardians further considered the case to which we alluded last week, of the old-age pensioner who, because he was a patient in the Guardians' hospital, was deprived of his pension on the ground that he had received poor relief, although the full cost of his maintenance and treatment had been defrayed by his relatives.

The Clerk mentioned two other cases which, it was said, illustrated the urgent need for reform.

In one case an expectant mother, arrangements for whose confinement had broken down at the last moment, was brought to the Guardians' hospital, where her child was born. The woman was not in straitened circumstances, yet both she and her baby had to be entered on the records as paupers.

In the second case a lad was brought into the hospital as an urgent case, and was forthwith operated on for appendicitis. The whole cost of his maintenance and treatment was paid by his father, who rightly protested against the lad being termed a pauper. Had he been admitted to the local isolation hospital suffering with scarlet fever he would not have been termed "a pauper," although the cost of his maintenance and treatment would have been charged to the rates.

The Guardians resolved to bring these cases to the notice of the Ministry of Health, and to press for the immediate removal of the disqualifications attaching to patients accepting treatment in Poor Law hospitals.

This course has been taken, and, in an admirable letter to the Secretary of the Department, Mr. Arthur Wilshire, Clerk, gives cogent reasons for reform, in view of the difficulties caused by the shortage of hospital accommodation. He refers to correspondence with the Department last year, and incidentally to an interview which took place in April last year between the Minister and a deputation of the British Medical Association on the question of the admission of paying patients into the Poor Law infirmaries. From this correspondence and the published report of the interview, we learn that all parties were agreed that in the present shortage of voluntary hospital accommodation it was absolutely necessary that Poor Law hospitals should be regarded as available for the sick on the broadest possible lines.

The term "pauper" has for many years been generally regarded as an offensive one, and the Guardians believe they are voicing the opinion of the public at large when they contend that it should not be applied to sick people anywhere, whether in Poor Law institutions or not.

It appears to be indisputable that grave danger would result to patients brought to the hospital as cases of sudden or urgent necessity if their admission thereto were held up until they were informed of the disqualification such admission would entail and they had consented thereto. An unconscious patient obviously could not consent, and it would be a barbarous thing to follow such a course in the case of a woman in labour. It is submitted that a Medical Officer who adopted such a procedure would be acting contrary to Section 54 of 4 & 5 Will. 4, Chap. 76, and would render himself very properly liable to penalties under that section. It therefore follows that in a number of cases the pauperisation of the patient becomes an accomplished fact without the patient's knowledge or his or her consent to the disqualifications that result therefrom.

The Guardians invite the Minister of Health to give sympathetic consideration to their difficulties, and to assist in removing the disqualifications that attach to patients in Poor Law hospitals, and which would not exist if these hospitals were under the control of a public authority other than a Board of Guardians.

Moreover, they want these disqualifications removed at once, without waiting for the long-expected scheme for the reform of the Poor Law.

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