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THE ECONOMIC POSITION OF NURSES.

Miss Lord took the chair at the meeting of the Literary and Debating Society on Monday, February 19th. The subject of debate was "The Economic Position of the Nurses." In commencing, Miss Macdonald said that it might be argued that by discussing anything so mundane as their economic position nurses were showing evidence of a tendency to materialise their profession, that they no longer regarded nursing as a vocation. But in the present condition of nursing is it possible to discount to a larger extent the economic aspect of nursing than the economics of any other profession? The fact is that, if the profession is to receive justice, it must either be managed on conventional lines or on professional lines. In the former case economics would not enter much into the considerations of the nurses. They might give service without fee or remuneration, for no more than the simple necessities of life in fact, while they were able to work, but they would at least be provided for and cared for in their later years. This is not the case if nursing is regarded purely as a profession, and it must be either one thing or the other. Therefore there is no sense in speaking of nursing as a vocation if thereby it is simply meant that the nurse should sell her qualification to minister to the necessities of the people in great emergencies at an enormously reduced rate in comparison with what the same people would pay, say, to those who amuse or educate them. You cannot place nursing on a more or less conventual footing while the nurses are young and their services are at their highest value, and then, when they reach an age at which their services are no longer of value, treat them as belonging to a professional or wage-earning class. The injustices of this are obvious enough. But apart from that, if the profession is to balance itself properly, if it is to harmonise and keep pace with its own development and the development of conditions of life in general, it must be placed on a sound economic basis, or it will not attract women of education and good mental capacity.

The moment you put a bar to such entrants you take an enormously retrograde step, for the quality of the profession depends upon that of the units, and it is quite impossible—we may as well face facts—to get the very best possible nurses for the sick unless we are able to assure them of a

remuneration that will give them the chance to be something more than mendicants in their old age, remuneration that will at least enable them to maintain the self-respect that independence, however modestly maintained, gives to them, and also which will allow reasonable opportunities to share the ordinary life of their time.

There are many grave menaces to the economic position of the nurses. One is that the hospitals largely set the pace for the salaries given, and these are, as a rule, far from adequate, though some of the larger hospitals do give pensions which offer a certain amount of security for the future. Another great factor in reducing the economic position of the nurses is the unqualified competition which meets them on every hand. In the field of public health work particularly their place has been usurped by thousands of people who have no hospital training whatever. Then, for the private nurses, there is the fact that very many large hospitals run private staffs of their own. What would happen were these same hospitals to say to their medical students when qualified: "Now you are qualified men we mean to run your practice in connection with the hospital; it will control your going out and your coming in; it will have power to dismiss you when it will; it will draw a certain amount from the sums you earn in the practice of your profession; it will have power to control your ethics and to receive reports of your work from your patients, and so on." It is obvious that not only the men of that hospital, but the whole medical profession would be in arms against the suggestion as an interference with professional and economic freedom.

It is contended it is a good thing for certain nurses to have their work assured through the hospital. It may be good for that few—I question it—but it is certainly unfair to the majority. The hospital has no justification for coming into competition in the economic market with the great majority of nurses in private work who have to build up their practices either by co-operation with each other in groups, or as independent individuals. And this leads up to another fact which mitigates against a just economic position for the nurses. They are practically unorganised and until the profession does become organic there is little hope that conditions will ever be what they ought. In a sense the profession is, if possible, worse than disorganised for the employers of nurses have used the only

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