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EDITORIAL.

THE FIRE AT THE Highbury Hospital.

The Departmental Committee appointed to inquire into the circumstances of the fire at the Highbury Hospital, Birmingham, under the Ministry of Pensions, have now made their Report concerning this disastrous occurrence, through which two bedridden pensioners lost their lives, and have made a number of recommendations.

The fire is stated to have *originated in some floor-polish, which was being melted on a stove, becoming alight*. This is the point we desire to emphasise, because, although various recommendations are made with the object of minimising fire risks which are no doubt quite necessary and commendable, no emphasis appears to be laid on the original and quite inexcusable cause of the fire.

To melt inflammable material on a stove to make floor-polish is at all times a highly dangerous proceeding. To do so in a hospital is in the highest degree reprehensible, and when that hospital is composed of wooden huts, containing bedridden and helpless patients, the highest censure is deserved not only by the person directly concerned, but by the authorities of the hospital who permitted so reprehensible and dangerous a practice.

Nor can such a practice be justified by any plea of necessity. There is no reason to endanger life by concocting floor-polish by melting inflammable materials over open stoves when there are excellent polishes on the market ready for use. We hope that an order will go forth from all Government Departments forbidding so dangerous a practice in the hospitals under their control, whether the structures are permanent or temporary.

The Departmental Committee are of opinion that the regrettable result of the Highbury fire

was due to a combination of circumstances rather than to any defects in the fire precautions adopted.

The Committee examined the fire precautions at seven hutment hospitals, and came to the conclusion that in the main the fire precautions are such that outbreaks are only likely to occur from accidental causes.

They consider that their recommendations will reasonably safeguard wooden hutments partly or wholly protected by non-combustible materials, but are less satisfied with regard to hospitals consisting in the main of wooden huts.

One danger pointed out is that of the wooden corridors connecting separate huts, and it is suggested that the sides of these corridors should be removed to prevent their forming fire-flues by which fire can be carried from one block to another. They also recommend that every hutment should have a clear exit at each end, with doors opening outwards, and fitted with "panic" bolts, and that huts more than 90 ft. long should have an exit on each side as well.

The Committee consider that it is a mistake to attempt to evacuate a ward by wheeling bedridden patients out in their beds, and that they should be carried out on mattresses or on stretchers. (They might also be carried out in blankets). The Committee point out, further, that no long grass should be allowed near the buildings, and that, if necessary, it should be possible to carry patients straight out into the grounds of the hospital for a distance of 100 yards. They also formed the opinion that the staff should be very thoroughly trained in fire drill.

The whole report demonstrates the very grave responsibility which rests upon all concerned, from the authorities responsible, downwards, to safeguard the lives of the patients under their care.

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