

THE UNWRITTEN LAW.

PERVERSIVE DISCIPLINE.

In the widely-reported case of an inquest on a poor suffering child held at the Downs Hospital for Children, Banstead, on Wednesday, July 25th, when allegations of cruelty were made against the medical woman in charge of the case by two nurses, the public get a glimpse into hospital methods so far as the unwritten law of what might be termed perversive discipline is concerned. The case was dealt with at the meeting of the Metropolitan Asylums Board on July 28th, and the Sub-Committee of the Children's Committee, in the course of a long report, announced that, since the inquest Dr. Alix Jeanne Churchill, the woman doctor in question, had resigned her appointment and is no longer on the hospital staff.

Nurses' Evidence at the Inquest.

Two nurses gave evidence at the inquest that they were present in the dressing-room during the dressing of the child's ear on July 12th, that the child had slipped from the doctor's knee on to the floor, that the doctor had pulled her up by her hair and ear, that this was repeated more than once, and that when the dressing was finished the doctor kicked the child four or five times, and sprinkled the hair, which had come out of the child's head, on her face.

The two nurses stated that they were kneeling by the child, one supporting the child's body as she was raised, and the other holding her hands.

The nurses further stated that they had reported the occurrence to the nurse temporarily in charge of the block during the absence of the sister on leave, first when the nurses were off duty the same evening, and again when they were on duty the next morning, but no further report was made by any one of the three, and nothing further happened until rumours reached the Matron on July 23rd.

Sub-Committee's Report.

The following report (abridged) of the Sub-Committee of the Children's Committee was circulated:—

"Patient M. M. Bullock.—The medical superintendent has reported that a patient named Marguerita May Bullock, aged 5½, who was admitted on April 9th, 1923, suffering from middle ear disease, was operated on in the hospital on June 19th, and died from meningitis on July 21st.

"The patient, he states, had previously undergone two operations in London some two or three years ago, and one when she was previously an inmate at The Downs Hospital.

"On July 23rd, the day before that fixed for the funeral, the medical superintendent was informed by the Matron that she had heard that nurses were stating that Dr. Churchill, assistant medical officer, had ill-treated the patient on July 12th.

"The funeral was postponed, and all the information in the medical superintendent's possession was at once communicated to the coroner, who held an inquiry into the death of the patient on July 25th.

"Dr. Churchill was legally represented, and the proceedings were watched on behalf of the Board by the Clerk to the Board.

"The nurse temporarily in charge of the block gave evidence that the reports were made to her, but that she did not take them to the matron or medical superintendent, as, after talking with one of the nurses making the report to her, they both felt that they could not report a superior officer.

"Dr. Churchill gave evidence entirely denying the allegations.

"The police surgeon of the district who had been deputed by the Coroner to conduct a post-mortem examination, gave evidence that death was due to septic meningitis, that there were no marks of violence on the body or evidence of bruises, and the jury returned a verdict of 'Death from natural causes.'

The Coroner pointed out discrepancies in the statements of the nurses.

"Apart from this," the report continues, "it appears to us very unlikely if the treatment occurred as described in detail by the nurses at the inquest, that, feeling as they say they felt, they would have been content for the matter to have remained unnoticed, and for the patient to have remained in the same hands for the following nine days.

No Written Law.

"With regard to the question of the nurses reporting the alleged occurrence, which was referred to by the Coroner and the jury as a matter for the hospital authorities, there is, of course, no regulation in the hospital or in the Board's service, and no teaching of nurses which would in any way lead them to suppose for a moment that they should not take steps to see that a report of such occurrences, as those they allege they witnessed, should at once reach the head of the institution, even though superior officers were affected.

Nurses Reprimanded.

"While it is very satisfactory that the allegations did reach the medical superintendent in time to permit of a full inquiry before the burial of the child, yet this did not happen through the direct agency of any one of the three nurses whose duty it was to report the case.

"We greatly regret their failure in this respect, and we have had the nurses before us and severely reprimanded them; in the case of the senior nurse for her failure to pass on the report she received to the matron or medical superintendent, and in the case of the other two for the part which they took in influencing their senior not to pass on the report and for taking no steps themselves to ensure that a proper report was made; and we have instructed the medical superintendent that the senior of the three nurses is not again to be placed even temporarily in charge of a hospital block without the express sanction of the Committee."

Discretion followed, and we agree with members of the Board that it is to be regretted that Dr. Churchill resigned before an inquiry could be held, both for her own sake and that of the nurses.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)