

THE BRITISH JOURNAL OF NURSING

WITH WHICH IS INCORPORATED
THE NURSING RECORD

EDITED BY MRS. BEDFORD FENWICK, REGISTERED NURSE.

No. 1,941. Vol. 78

APRIL, 1930.

Price Sevenpence

EDITORIAL.

A GREAT HISTORICAL CHANGE.

With the transfer of the authority of the Poor Law Guardians to the county authorities, which took place on April 1st, another page of history is turned.

It is common knowledge that during the middle ages the sick, the poor, and the destitute were cared for by the Religious Orders, and that such care, if unscientific, was kindly. With the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII this ceased, and there was practically no provision for the care of these unfortunates.

The statute in connection with the Poor Law passed in 1601 in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and known as "the 43rd of Elizabeth," authorised the appointment of "Overseers of the Poor" who were charged with raising and administering a "common fund" for the necessary relief of the poor, and that Statute, with modifications, has governed Poor Law administration to the present time. In 1834 Poor Law Commissioners were created for England and Wales, and the administration of relief was placed under their control. Poor Law Unions were formed for uniting parishes for general administration, and Guardians elected by the rate-payers were entrusted with the general government and administration of relief. It was not until 1871 that the laws relating to the public health, the relief of the poor, and local government were centred in one department, and the Local Government Board was established by Act of Parliament. This existed until 1919, when an Act was passed establishing in its place the present Ministry of Health. By the Local Government Act of 1929 the functions of the Poor Law Authorities are transferred to the Councils of the Counties or County Boroughs, and the "Poor Law" becomes "Public Assistance."

The weakness of the Poor Laws has been that they have aimed, not at the prevention of destitution, but at its relief, and so had the effect of creating it, for it has been necessary to prove destitution before relief could be obtained. An unfortunate point in regard to the admission of patients to Poor Law infirmaries has been that they have thereby become paupers in the eyes of the law, although they may be of the same social status as other sick persons suffering from diseases of more scientific interest who are admitted to the voluntary hospitals. With the passing of the Poor Law and the substitution of "Public Assistance" this disability does not arise.

In regard to nursing under the Poor Law, until the latter half of the nineteenth century it had fallen into general disrepute, and the work of reform proceeded more slowly than in the voluntary hospitals. We know that the interest of Miss Florence Nightingale was extended to Poor Law infirmaries, that a pupil trained in the Nightingale Training School at St. Thomas's Hospital was appointed Matron of the Marylebone Infirmary, and there is still to be seen there a photograph of a group of probationers with Miss Nightingale in their midst. On page 108 we refer to the work of another Nightingale pupil, Miss Agnes Jones, who transformed from chaos to order the wards of the Brownlow Hill Infirmary, Liverpool.

In 1897 an Order promulgated by the Local Government Board, known as the "Nursing in Workhouses Order, 1897," was passed, being the first affecting nursing for over fifty years. It did not apply to infirmaries or nursing schools separate from the workhouse, and enacted that wherever the staff of female nurses in a workhouse consisted of three or more persons, one should be appointed as Superintendent Nurse. Further, that any Superintendent Nurse appointed after the commencement of the Order should have had three years' training in the wards of a hospital or infirmary, and it definitely abolished nursing by paupers.

In 1910 the President of the Local Government Board appointed three fully-trained and experienced nurses as Inspectors in England of maternity wards, nurseries, infirmaries, and the nursing arrangements in Poor Law Institutions, and this was swiftly followed by the appointment of an Inspector for Wales.

The passing of the Nurses' Registration Acts in 1919 found the nurses in Poor Law infirmaries able to take their place in the examinations instituted under the authority of the General Nursing Council for England and Wales, side by side with those trained in the voluntary hospitals, and to pass with equal credit.

Henceforth the Poor Law infirmaries will rank as Municipal Hospitals, and the Poor Law system which, with its virtues and its failings, seemed for so many years so deeply rooted a British institution, is no more. Many Guardians have given much unselfish labour to its administration, and they do not pass unregretted. Typical of many incidents is that at the Barnet Union where, a contemporary states, "The Guardians sang a parting hymn, the master of the workhouse drew down the blinds, and the inmates lined up to say good-bye. Women members of the board received bouquets from the inmates, several of whom burst into tears.

"Then the weighty workhouse gates silently closed on the Board for the last time."

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)