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EDITED BY MRS. BEDFORD FENWICK, REGISTERED NURSE.

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EDITORIAL.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF HOSPITAL COMMITTEES.

We have often wondered why people undertake the serious responsibility of managing hospitals and kindred institutions with no other qualifications than, perhaps, a sense of public duty. Presumably, it is not too much to say that many hospital governors have failed to realise the complicated business involved, and how dependent they are for the successful management of the institution on the officials selected to supervise the various departments—social, secretarial, medical, nursing and pharmaceutical. Surely such a varied combination of highly skilled work calls for some experience of details before a person (with the best intentions in the world) can be competent to control an institution so closely associated with life and death. We are of opinion that the least a person assuming the responsibility of hospital management must realise is his duty to keep in close personal touch with the heads of the various departments, and be accessible to all. The system which of late years has crept into hospital management of committees sitting round a table and deputing to one autocratic official responsibility for the whole hospital is unfair to departmental officers, who should be made personally responsible to the Committee for the efficient conduct of their own highly skilled professional work.

We well remember when fifty years ago, as a young woman of twenty-four, we were appointed Matron and Superintendent of Nursing at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, asking the Treasurer and Almoners if we should have personal access to the Committee, and thus directly represent the requirements of the Nursing Department, and our satisfaction on being instructed that it was our weekly duty to place an official written report before them in a locked book, and also to attend personally to give any further information required.

We recall this excellent arrangement on reading the report of the Committee which has been investigating the administration of the Livingstone Hospital, Dartford, appointed by the British Hospitals Association following an inquest on a woman patient, who died as the result of being given belladonna in mistake for syrup of figs by a young probationer nurse. The Report states, in part :—

“We have come to the conclusion that the administration of the hospital is impeded by the absence of rules defining the duties and responsibilities of the different members of the staff. Consequently, there has been lack

of proper supervision and an inadequacy of essential written records and reports.

“We are of the opinion that the Committee of Management has not fully appreciated the fact that the ultimate responsibility for the efficient management of a hospital rests with them, and that this responsibility is not entirely met by the appointment of officials, however competent these may be, or however high the qualifications possessed.

“It is the duty of the Committee of Management to provide: (a) organisation by which its officials may regularly present it reports relating to their duties; (b) certain safeguards of a general character by which it may satisfy itself regarding the state of the Institution for the good management of which it is responsible. Therefore, regulations in accordance with the general practice of other similar hospitals should at once be drawn up and put into force.

“There is no doubt that the Committee of Management has regarded the Matron as its chief executive officer, and has placed heavy responsibilities upon her. She does not appear to have had adequate access to either the General Committee or the House Committee, nor has there been any officer, either lay or professional, on whom she could rely for help or advice, in the carrying out of her duties. There is, moreover, no doubt whatever that with regard to the handling of poisonous drugs, the practice has been not only at complete variance with the teaching of the schools at which both the Matron and Sister were trained, but at variance also with the dictates of common prudence.

“We strongly urge the committee without delay, to provide everything that is necessary for the safeguarding of poisonous drugs in respect of (a) purchase, (b) receipt, (c) storage, (d) dispensing, (e) administration.

With these recommendations we are in sympathy, but regret the Committee did not express a more definite opinion on nursing organisation. It stated “with regard to the nurses, we hesitate to speak critically, knowing the difficulty that smaller hospitals experience in obtaining suitable probationer nurses.” We advise that in small hospitals probationers should be reduced to a minimum, and that highly trained Sisters and Staff Nurses should be principally employed at liberal salaries, and that under no circumstances should “young probationers” be permitted to handle, or administer, poisonous drugs to the patients.

It is stated that prior to the issuing of the report the committee of management of the hospital had given instructions with regard to the purchase and the administration of drugs in the hospital. A fully-qualified person has been obtained to attend the hospital to issue all drugs, and no persons other than qualified men will in future have access to the dispensary.

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