

THE ORGANISATION OF THE REGISTERED NURSE.*

SELF-GOVERNMENT AND PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY, NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL.

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It was with some degree of diffidence that I agreed to the suggestion that I should present to the Congress a paper on this subject, for, in such a Congress, there must of necessity be present most of the recognised authorities on organisation, the experts one might say, those who have participated in bringing organisation to that grand climax, the International Council of Nurses. It is a comforting reflection to me, however, that I am not expected to produce a finished piece of work, but merely to present an introduction to what I hope will prove an enlightening and helpful discussion; it is on the contributions arising on such discussion that the value of this morning's conference will depend.

In using the word organisation we are led on almost consequentially to the word organism and to the reflection that organisation may result in one of two things. It may result, as it should, in the creation of an organism, an entity functioning healthily and effectively in national and international life, the embodiment in our particular case, of all the interests, possibilities and activities that belong to the nursing profession, an organism in the sense that it is capable of self-development, self-determination and self-government, capable in fact of creative possibilities arising from forces of thought and will within itself rather than from any urge from outside. That, in a few words, expresses my idea of healthy and active organisation on purely professional lines. But there is always the danger, if principles of self-government are not adhered to, that organisation may not result in the creation of an organism alive to its responsibilities; it may result, on the contrary, in the formation of a mechanism, a kind of machine functioning efficiently enough perhaps in certain directions, but unreliable in others because it lends itself perhaps readily to outside influences or, from a preponderance of one class of interests over others, is apt to function in a one-sided way, to function in obedience to one set of interests and not from a spirit and will of its own.

We have not gone very far yet from that period when to propose organisation for the profession, especially on the lines of self-determination and self-government, was held to be a step opposed to the best traditions of nursing, inimical indeed to the true spirit of nursing. A timorous suggestion this, and yet one that acted in a powerfully retardative way for decades. People lost sight of the fact that, if the spirit of nursing is to remain alive and active, *it must advance with the spirit of the age*. It can no longer be insulated in works of charity and devotion. Such a condition of things was right in the middle ages when service and guidance from others was of the spirit of the time, for education had not reached its present level and, a more important reason still, only the few were really reaching out into self-consciousness with its resultant tendency, and indeed responsibility, for self-determination. But evolution brings transmutation, and one might say that the sacrifices and services of the nurses of the middle ages—nurses like the Holy Elizabeth in her hospital at Marburg and the Augustinian Sisters of the Hotel Dieu in Paris—are now transmuted into action within a corporate life (as for instance that in the International Council of Nurses), instead of in the quiet devotion and service of individuals. In every aspect of life and activity there are always two poles (comparable to the negative and positive

poles in an electric battery) and usually the idea to be aimed at is the attainment of a proper balance between these two. At the one pole, in organisation, lies the danger that a few individuals may dictate the policy of the whole (that aspect I shall refer to later) and at the other pole there is, of course, the fact that, if every individual sought to enforce her opinions, we would have the opposite extreme, a kind of war of all against all which naturally would hinder progress. "Thought is free" say the philosophers, and indeed it is only in thought that we can be completely free. It is the responsibility of every Registered Nurse to realise and use this freedom in some degree, in other words to think for herself and so help the spirit of nursing to keep abreast of the age in order that organisation may function in professional self-knowledge, self-determination and self-government. This trilogy should be the motif of our organisation to-day, and especially the matter of self-government is one which the Founder of the International Council of Nurses has constantly stressed, its soundness and value on such a strong basis as the Registration Acts cannot be over-estimated. Compromise and expediency are not necessary if these Acts are made the basis and foundation for organisation. Out of true self-knowledge the profession of nursing, as personified in the Registered Nurses, should direct and control its standard of activities, its organisation and policy; in other words, it has now reached adult growth and should stand upon its feet.

Just for a moment I would direct consideration to one point, the extent to which what we might call the economic circuit threads its way into professional organisation and, visibly or otherwise, gains greater control than is justifiable. From this point of view, it might be well, for purposes of discussion, to divide those aspects with which organisation should concern itself, into three. First there is the ethical, in which I would include education and that vocational spirit which we have inherited from the ages and which must not be lost to the profession but caught up and held by the genius of evolution. In no other profession are we more justified in speaking of the two forms of knowledge—knowledge of the heart and knowledge of the head—hence this first aspect covers much. Then there is the political aspect, the aspect of rights one might call it, and this lays upon organisation the demand that the policy to which it gives direction shall not be dominated by expediency, otherwise you condemn the spirit of nursing to dwell in a distorted body, an organism that is not capable of functioning in freedom. Last comes the third aspect, that relating to economics, and there is a tendency constantly for it to dominate the other two. More often than not this arises from the intervention of lay influences and interests in professional organisation. The economic aspect, however, is one that might absorb the consideration of many a conference; it may be said to commence with the individual nurse, for so very few nurses are economically free. These three aspects with which organisation should concern itself press into view in one form and another. Indeed the extent to which the profession of nursing has sent its threads in a regular network through the life of the community must of necessity raise ever new problems for organised conference, but all the more does it follow that they should be approached with true professional self-knowledge. In Great Britain the organisation of the nurses under the Registration Acts differs somewhat from that in other countries, where such Acts are functioning. The difference lies in the fact that, in addition to the General or main Register under the Act we have, in accordance with the provisions of the Act, certain Registers for specialists. Some day it is to be hoped that specialisation will be organised or founded as supplementary in the sense of being additional to the general training, in this we should be

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