

DEBATE ON NURSING SERVICES IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS*

There were quite a number of Registered Nurses in the Members' and Ladies' Galleries in the House of Commons, on Tuesday, April 18th, to listen to the debate on the Nursing Services (as recommended in the Interim Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee), and, with few exceptions, nothing could have been more futile than the speeches.

Sir Francis Fremantle, M.D., M.P., member for St. Albans, and a very active member of the Inter-Departmental Committee, moved: "This House, taking note of the Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Nursing Services, recognises the inadequate supply of nurses to meet the increasing demand for their services and the urgent need of reform in their training, registration and conditions of service, both for institutional and domiciliary nursing."

"Nursing," he said, "is no longer merely a personal service; it serves a national need. It is of national importance; it serves, incidentally, every Government Department in one form or another, and, above all, from the nurses' training schools, nurses go out into every part of the world to serve the Empire. I think, therefore, that it is proper to regard it as coming within the purview of the Civil Estimates. I should like," said Sir Francis, "to deal with this matter from the nurses' point of view"—which he did from the view of a catch-penny Press and not from the professional view of Registered Nurses. He laid great stress on the shortage of nurses, apparent by approval of the policy of the Home Office in admitting foreigners of either sex "who can do useful service in the nursing world," and had the grace to add, "from the patients' point of view as well as from the point of view of the volunteers, that it is not easy to get women who could give suitable service to the patients." He enumerated the six factors from which an increased demand arises: increase of hospital beds, increased demand from the passing of the Local Government Act, 1929, and the transfer of the Poor Law to local authorities, increased demand for hospital treatment in acute sickness, an increased demand for domiciliary nursing, which he strongly advocated—the fifth factor the increased demand for nurses through the development of medical technique, and the reduction of working hours of nurses in the wards.

Sir Francis then emphasised the need for 20,000 entrants for the State Examination a year, whereas only 9,000 were at present available. Then he spoke of filling the gap of examinations, stating that "the main criticism is that many women who are entirely suited to nursing, not merely because of their kindness of heart and devotion to duty, but in respect of intelligence also, cannot pass an examination, so that the examinations in themselves are keeping out women who are quite capable of doing the work of nursing."

Which, in effect, emphasises the fact that the Inter-Departmental Committee is of opinion that women who are *mentally deficient*, so far as education is concerned, are quite suitable attendants on the sick!

Sir Francis hastily informed the House that "I am not myself dealing with the question of the Assistant Nurse, that would be referred to by the seconder of the Amendment."

Speaking on the working hours of hospital nurses, Sir Francis said, "There is now a demand for a 96-hour fortnight," and asked, "How can this limitation be achieved? The nursing profession, almost without exception, is opposed to its imposition by Statute." That statement is not accurate, the majority of hospital managers have made this concession; and where it has not been done the workers are well aware that the power of the Law is their only hope.

Sir Francis then recommended, in our opinion, a totally unmoral suggestion. He said, "It would be better than having a statutory limitation of hours to do it through the method of grants, and to say that grants from public sources should be conditional on reasonable hours being worked by the nurses."

In effect, hospital managers prepared to overwork their nurses should be bribed to deal humanely with them. In our opinion these persons should be penalised, as they would be if they over-

worked their defenceless animals! Thus we know of many nurses who would welcome Statutory control of working hours in institutions. The opinions of Sir Francis on salaries and pensions, on recruitment by the establishment of a committee or organisation to deal with these matters, and on good accommodation and reasonable discipline, are sound.

He considered that nursing should be a pensionable service, and with that we all agree.

Colonel C. E. Ponsonby, member for Sevenoaks (a member of the London Hospital House Committee for the last 13 years), seconded the Amendment. He congratulated Sir Francis Fremantle, Miss Megan Lloyd George and Mr. Rhys Davies, members of the Inter-Departmental Committee, "who have produced what is really a new chapter in nursing history." It is, indeed!

Colonel Ponsonby said that statements made in the Press "contained exaggerations and unjustified generalisations which have had a deplorable effect on recruitment and that important reforms have been carried out in many of the larger hospitals in recent years; and that twice as many nurses were admitted to the Register in 1937 as in 1926, and the real shortage is due to the fact that the demand has far outpaced supply."

Assistant Nurses.

Suffice it to say that Colonel Ponsonby advocated the compilation of a Roll (in fact, a Register) of unqualified women. "It has been suggested that there should be a special Roll for these assistant nurses, perhaps under the General Nursing Council, quite different from the State Register for trained nurses. There is a certain amount of controversy about this. It is suggested that they might be called 'approved invalid attendants' or 'nursing orderlies.' It does not much matter about the name, because as between the patient and the woman, she would still be the nurse. . . . After all, midwives are registered, so why should not assistant nurses be registered? I see no reason why there should be any objection on the part of State Registered Nurses to such a proposal. . . . I should like to emphasise that this matter requires tackling without delay."

The Registered Nurses who realise the danger to the sick and their profession of this monstrous proposal are tackling it. We are now paying £50,000 a year for the upkeep of our Governing Body, the General Nursing Council, and its administrative work, and to imagine that we shall tamely submit to be governed by a Body, accepting responsibility for the registration and control of second-grade nurses unable to qualify for their responsible duties, is degradation to which we will not submit.

A Flow of Futility.

We then listened to a flow of futility from many well-meaning persons totally ignorant of the professional and economic conditions of nursing. To Mrs. M. C. Tate, member for Frome, we owe an expression of gratitude. She alone expressed the opinion that "to register assistant nurses for general nursing I believe to be one very detrimental both to the nursing profession and to the general public. . . . do not introduce the dangerous principle of allowing an assistant nurse to compete with a State Registered nurse in the open market."

The Minister of Health.

The speech of Mr. Elliot, the Minister of Health, was non-committal. He would issue a circular to local authorities, and to the voluntary hospitals. . . . "It would clearly be inappropriate for me to make any pronouncement here." . . .

The Amendment by leave was withdrawn.

A PARROT CRY.

"Assistant Nurses must be Controlled."

I don't know what you mean by "glory," Alice said. Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. Of course you don't—till I tell you! I meant "there's a nice knock-down argument for you!"

But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument," Alice objected.

When I use a word, Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.

From *Alice in Wonderland*.

* *Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons Official Report.* His Majesty's Stationery Office, York House, Kingsway, London, W.C.2. Price 6d. net.

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