

## THE GRAVE SHORTAGE OF NURSES.

At the House of Lords on Tuesday, November 9th, 1948, the shortage of nurses was debated.

LORD CROOK rose to call attention to the grave shortage of nurses. He felt it was essential to put the motion on the Order Paper in view of the considerable national importance which, in his view, was attached to the subject. He suggested that no one participating in the debate should fail to commence by paying tribute to all that nurses had done for us in recent years and particularly during the war. He recalled the fact that the shortage of nurses was not a sudden event, but that there had been a shortage since the beginning of the First World War and that for this reason the *Lancet* appointed a commission of enquiry as long ago as 1932. Lord Crook continued to give actual figures of employed nurses, stating that 31,000 more were employed today against that of 1938. He stated that at present the actual number of vacancies for nurses was 33,000, though to meet the present-day shortage 50,000 nurses, and no less, were required. The efficiency of the Health Service would depend upon the number of nurses obtained. He stressed the fact that the public were unaware that over the last century the nursing service had grown out of its former relations with the growth of the population. He also asked to pay tribute to the Queen's Nurses whom, he said, had given magnificent service to the community.

Lord Crook continued to congratulate the Ministry on the Red and White Working Party Reports; he also referred to the Minority Report which he pointed out was valuable though he would not suggest that he agreed with it altogether or would accept all the conclusions therein. Lord Crook referred to the tyrants of matrons under whom the poor students had to work, and to the wrongness of the cloistered life of the sister, and of the matrons and sisters who were brought up the hard way, and made it their duty to see that new students were brought up likewise. Some of the instances given were, indeed, unbelievable, though one might agree may have existed five or ten years ago—hardly today, and if so where?

A 40-hour week was the next suggestion, and a permanent off-duty list. He said in particular that the solution to the present difficulties must involve a realisation of facts, that there were modern trends, and that we could not run nursing services only on Florence Nightingale traditions, but that there would have to be organised conditions, where traditions could still be held. Saying the mere fact that we are trying to get them decent pay and conditions does not militate against their living under the Rule of St. Benedict.

Before all things, and above all things, special care must be taken of the sick so that they may be served in every deed, as Christ Himself said, "I was sick and ye visited me, and what ye did to one of these My least brethren ye did to Me."

LORD RUSHCLIFFE, the next speaker, referred to the fact that as Chairman of the Nurses' Salaries Committee he had formed his impressions which may or may not have proved right. He thought the committee in question had brought home to the public the very great debt owed to the nursing profession, and how very inadequately that debt was being met. He thought wastage would be curtailed if the responsibility for the training of nurses could be separated from providing hospital nursing services. That, he imagined, was what we had in the medical services. A nurse, he considered, should be a student and have all the opportunities of a student. The domestic side should be taken from nurses, such as sweeping, dusting, etc. During the last few years Lord Rushcliffe said he had visited many hospitals, and he found that on entering a hospital he could sense at once

whether the hospital was what one would term a happy ship. This happiness, he stressed, depended upon the matron. He was satisfied that the majority of matrons were deeply anxious at this time to do the best they could for the comfort and happiness of those entrusted to their charge.

VISCOUNT SIMON stressed, as the next speaker, necessity for the public to realise that salary did not lie at the root of the explanation for shortage. He said it was absolutely essential that the student should be helped to feel a sense of vocation. He stated "it is that sense, from such experience I have had, which is really the essential thing in a successful career. It is the sense that they were constantly discharging a function as in all fine vocations for the benefit of other people, and not entirely for themselves."

Viscount Simon then referred to Lord Rushcliffe's suggestion regarding the separation of nurses in training and provision of the nurses' service. He thought this would be difficult because a large part of the training of the nurse consisted in doing the very things of which her nursing service was composed. Referring to general improvements in nursing, Viscount Simon recalled Florence Nightingale by repeating the remarks of the soldier in Scutari when he pointed to the Lady of the Lamp and said, "Before she came it was all cursing and swearing and now it is as Holy as a church."

LORD AMULREE, referring to wastage of nurses, said that without question the majority of matrons did not treat their nurses like school-children. He felt that patients for investigation and up-patients who did not necessarily need skilled nursing should be in wards set aside for admitting such patients, and looked after by the student nurse, but not necessarily by a trained nurse, who would be free to be fully utilised in the wards where there was skilled nursing required.

EARL BEAUCHAMP referred to the serious shortage in mental hospitals. The one he was interested in had 443 male patients to 44 male nurses, and 573 female patients looked after by the 36 whole time nurses and six part-time nurses. As many part-time nurses to fill the gap was essential, he felt everything possible to improve the rooms, amenities and recreation for nurses should be done. He spoke highly of the great part played by the nursing profession as a whole.

LORD SHEPHERD craved for the kindness of all members of the House, as this was his maiden speech from the bench. It was indeed satisfying to hear Lord Shepherd say that the present shortage of nurses was not due to some form of rot that had set in, and that it had not been occasioned because the hospital services were going bankrupt. He stated that actually there had been no diminution in the rate of recruitment. The number of hospital nurses taking up and completing training, for state registration, had for many years shown a steady increase and that the trouble was that the rate of recruitment in the nursing field needed to be much higher to come within measurable distance of meeting the need. Lord Shepherd felt that a 40-hour week would not be possible until more nurses were available. He also spoke of salaries and what was being done for the profession as a whole in this way. He referred to the necessity of employing, in greater number, male nurses. He also said that he regretted that the economic situation and the manpower of the country forced him to suggest such outrageous things as taking away ministering angels and substituting male nurses.

He felt sure that if the public realised its responsibility for hospital services, it would help the Government in building one of the finest hospital services in the world.

LORD CROOK rose again to thank each speaker in turn for the kindly reception they had given to his motion.

MARGARET B. MACKELLAR

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