

The Nurses' Bill.

WE were privileged to have the opportunity to be present in the House of Commons to hear the Second Reading of the Nurses' Bill on Friday, October 21st, 1949.

Arriving early in the main Lobby of the House, we were in time to see the first formality of the day, when, preceded by the Mace Bearer, The Speaker passed through the Lobby to the Chamber as *Big Ben* boomed the hour of 11 o'clock.

The debate on the Nurses' Bill was a long one in a very thinly attended House, and the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Health (MR. A. BLENKINSOP), in moving that the Bill be now read a second time, stated: "I should like to commence by expressing to the House the regrets of my right hon. friend for his inability to be here this morning for reasons which I think are well known to everyone in the House."

Mr. Blenkinsop continued: "We all recognised the vital importance of the nursing profession in the development of our whole Health Service in this country. Indeed there is nothing more distressing to any of us than to see, as we go round the country and look through some of our hospitals, empty hospital beds—where the need for accommodation is real and urgent, and where shortage of staff means, in some cases, that we cannot provide the accommodation we would all like to be able to provide.

"Nevertheless, it was encouraging to find that the numbers of full and part-time nurses are increasing, due largely to the administrative measures taken. Full-time nurses and midwives had increased from 116,500 in 1947 to 127,000 in June, 1949. During the same period the number of part-time nurses had increased from 10,700 to 22,800.

"Another effect of the shortage of nurses, and in some cases of accommodation as well, is the very severe pressure indeed upon existing nursing staffs.

"Those nursing staffs who are specially pressed are those who work in chronic wards in hospitals and those who work in mental hospitals and sanatoria, where they have to work under difficult conditions indeed. It is amazing to all of us who go and see the work they do to find what high standards are maintained in those hospitals.

"I am sure we should all like to pay our tribute, particularly to those nurses and staff who are doing such very fine work in such very difficult and trying circumstances." [Hon. members "hear, hear."]

LT.-COL. ELLIOT (Scottish Universities), welcoming the Bill, said: "The profession in some ways covers the very pick of the young women of our country, and those of us who have had either professional experience or experience as consumers in utilising the services of the nurses will, I think, all wish to pay testimony, not merely to their high professional quality and standing—for that is recognised in all countries of the world—but for the amount of human sympathy and goodwill which they are able to maintain under trying conditions and for years of time."

In alluding to discipline Lt.-Col. Elliot spoke of the danger of discipline degenerating into petty tyranny, a failure to alter with the times—the attitude towards smoking, for instance. There must be some way of making sure that the traditions and conditions to which British nursing owes so much, as laid down in the beginning by Florence Nightingale, shall not be weakened and diluted until they no longer evoke the spirit of comradeship and sacrifice essential in a profession in which these qualities inevitably play so great a part.

MR. F. MESSER (Labour, Tottenham) said he could understand that if a girl had to go to hospital a long way from home her parents wanted an assurance that there would be some oversight of their daughter and not merely during working hours. But he did not think this applied to the

mature woman who wants to be a nurse, and said: "I see no reason why a nurse should not be housed in a hostel under a warden who is not necessarily a certified nurse herself."

He considered that a home sister was taken to do purely administrative work at a time when qualified nurses were needed in wards.

BRIGADIER PETO (Conservative, Barnstaple), in speaking on the Bill, said that at the end the Parliamentary Secretary said that all those who were interested professionally were consulted about the various points in the Bill before it was drafted. If the Minister did, "it appeared to him, that their view has been considerably overlooked."

Another point which he wished to ask the Minister (already cleared up), the exact composition of the nurse training committees, and desired to emphasise the importance of including on those committees a high proportion of trained nurses, matrons and so on, and understood this had already been agreed in another place.

MR. SKINNARD (Labour, Harrow E.), said: "There are girls who are capable of passing examinations and making good nurses but who have been put off by the enormous scope of the training, which they are expected to undergo. For that reason I think there is a great deal in the plea of my hon. Friend the member for Barking (who, after his many years of experience in the medical profession and hospital work, should know what he is talking about) for not lowering the standards but for a simplification of the curriculum, and restriction to essentials."

MRS. MANNING (Labour, Epping), in alluding to the shortage of recruits for the nursing profession, said that only something like 35,000 girls of 16 years of age leave the secondary grammar schools each year, of which the teaching profession alone will, by 1952, require 11,000 recruits, leaving a very small margin for all the other jobs. Leaving the modern schools every year there are 82,900 girls, a much bigger pool from whom a choice can be made.

"If we consider this other pool of nearly 83,000 girls, there is greater hope if only the girls can be shown a way into the nursing profession which does not repel them from the beginning."

Mrs. Manning continued: "I know parents are a little anxious about the question of discipline, but I do not think that it is quite such a deterrent as bad conditions. Conditions in which many young nurses work in the hospitals, some of which are very anxious to get nurses at present, are not what they ought to be. I am thinking of the great hospital in my own division, St. Margaret's at Epping, and their immediate need for nurses' accommodation. What should be said of the nursing staff in a hospital which has to look after not only the chronic sick and aged but also the tubercular, which has a general ward, a maternity ward, a casual department, and children who ought to be in homes for mentally backward children? This is a municipal hospital. What should be said of the matron of such a conglomeration? Has she not as much technical and executive ability as any matron of one of the great teaching hospitals?"

In paying tribute to nurses who work in hospitals such as St. Margarets, Mrs. Manning did not think the great teaching hospitals had any right to their splendid isolation; they should not be regarded as the aristocrats of the hospitals. A girl has great pride in saying that she trained at Barts or U.C.H. or Thomas' or Guy's. We must build-up that prestige for our other hospitals.

Other speakers in the debate were Mr. Diamond, Mr. Howard, Mr. Basil Nield, Dr. Morgan, Mr. Sorensen, Sir Hugh Lucas-Tooth and Lt.-Col. Lipton.

In reply to Mr. Diamond, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Health gave an assurance that the Exchequer would have full power to make a full 100 per cent. grant to the expenses of the council.

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