

## **The scandal of the nursing home.**

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# The Scandal of the Nursing Home

Some Facts as to Mismanagement, Neglect and Poor Food endured by Invalids in establishments owned by Unqualified People whose chief aim is to make Large Profits

When you allow your nearest and dearest to enter a Nursing Home, you are probably under the impression that they will receive the advantages of a Hospital as regards Skilled Nursing, Up-to-date Appliances and Hygienic Conditions, combined with Personal Attention, the best Dieting, Rest, Quiet, and freedom from Routine that would not be practicable in a big Institution. And you feel that, although it is hard to have loved ones away from you at a time when they need all the Comfort and Companionship that home can provide, the benefits to be derived will far outbalance this disadvantage. Now, though it is true that there are a few Nursing Homes admirably conducted and all that anyone can desire, how far the Average Home falls short of such an Ideal the following article will show.—EDITOR.

IN the near future we are likely to hear much on the subject of nursing homes and their internal management. Speaking not long ago at Guy's Hospital, the Marquis of Salisbury said that he could tell tales of them that "would make the hair curl" of his hearers.

One of such responsibility as himself does not make a statement of this kind rashly, and he hastened to explain that there are, as every doctor or experienced observer knows, nursing homes that are admirably and conscientiously conducted; but at the same time there are very many existing only to earn the highest possible profits for their owners, even when this is to be drawn from sufferers temporarily helpless and entirely at their mercy.

So grave has the discredit to woman's most noble profession become, that already an association is in the course of formation whose object is to preserve the good name and repute of nursing homes. It is proposed to form a registry of such establishments, to which none shall be admitted unless the matron or sister-in-charge holds the certificate of a recognised school of nursing. Further, proof will be demanded that the nurses employed are also qualified and certificated; and those who are forming the committee will set a high professional standard as to the general conduct and management.

It is intended also to be a central organisation through which complaints put forward by persons who have been in nursing homes can be investigated. Those supporting this effort include several members of the London County Council who moved actively in the matter of suppressing the bogus registry offices which had become such an evil.

Old-fashioned people there are who ask why nursing homes are necessary at all. They urge that in a past generation the victim of illness or accident, unless very poor, was tended in his or her house, and all that the love and attention of the members of the family, and the skill of the trained nurse called in, could do, was devoted to the case. But they forget how progressive has been the science of medicine and surgery in the last two decades or so, and that the physician demands conditions for the absolute fulfilment of his course of treatment often impossible in an ordinary household; while an operation calls for appliances, the paraphernalia of sterilisation, and after-surroundings quite outside the domestic equipment. Moreover, the modern flat or the villa residence affords no suitable accommodation in serious illness, which dislocates all the usual routine of daily life.

Thus, the nursing home has become a necessary appanage of the healing art. As originally conceived, when a great specialist placed his patient under the care of some nurse well known to himself, all went well. It was when the money-earning, and to some extent speculative, element began to enter prominently into it that dangers arose, especially when those embarking upon it had never themselves been nurses at all.

With £1,000 as capital the starting of a "nursing

home" was very easy, and it has often been done for much less! The sum is no greater than many a butler who has married the cook or the lady's maid of a big establishment puts into an apartment house in a good West-End street.

To the widow left with about this amount, nothing seems to offer a better or more profitable way of using her money than to open a place of this kind. But naturally she knows nothing of the selection of nurses, or the relative value of certificates; and her heterogeneous staff will be drawn together for reasons quite outside their qualifications for the care of the sick. Then any possible influence that can be brought to bear upon doctors to send their patients to the "home" will be exercised, and the wheels set in motion generally that it is hoped will bring in the unfortunate folk destined to its tender mercies.

"Of course some of these nursing homes have been started by people without capital and by unscrupulous people," no less an authority than Sir James Crichton-Browne has publicly stated, "and there have been exposures of gross mistreatment and neglect as to food, ventilation and warmth. They also take in lunatics to a certain extent," he added. Cases in which patients have committed suicide in the absence of proper watchfulness have been investigated by coroners and juries, and in one of these the proprietress admitted that the unhappy individual placed in her charge was "nearly insane," while she herself in answer to the searching questions put to her had to confess that she had had no training as a nurse, "but had had a lot of experience!"

Good nursing and proper food, as all of us are aware, are essentials to the recovery of an invalid, whether after serious illness or grave operation. One highly-trained matron, who herself presides over a home that is entirely reliable, estimates that nearly 70 per cent. of the nurses so-called in nursing homes are not adequately trained, accepting the standard of three years in a hospital ward as the least time in which anyone can be regarded as becoming qualified. In that number, however, there will be a very large proportion who have found themselves unequal to the demands of a great hospital for intelligence, obedience, punctuality, and the hundred other attributes needed for a good nurse.

A Sister of wide knowledge said to me, commenting on this subject, "Yes, the 'slackers' know they can easily get into these homes, and if the pay is not so high as in the wards or in really first class private nursing, they think the life will be much easier, and that what we require as essentials in the care of the patients they can muddle over in some slap-dash way. And the fact that they can get into these homes renders some quite satisfied to pick up just enough superficial knowledge to pass muster in such places, instead of studying to become efficient in the profession."

But there are depths lower than that to be sounded. Not a few of these homes advertise for "probationers," demanding from these girls a premium—in some instances

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quite a substantial sum—for training them. Not long ago, a young woman sued the proprietress of such an establishment for the return of ten guineas that she had paid for instruction promised—which, of course, she did not get; and she secured a verdict in her favour. This, as a very great surgeon specialist has pointed out, is nothing short of a deliberate fraud on the public, inasmuch as it is perfectly impossible that in the work of a nursing home a woman could gain sufficient instruction to go out as a nurse, especially when, as is so often the case, the keeper of the home is not even trained herself.

As to the status and education of some of these nursing home "probationers," the evidence of Sir Victor Horsley, given before the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the subject of the registration of nurses may be quoted: "I can give you," he said, "one very striking case. In an operating home to which I frequently send patients, I discovered one day, attending to one of my patients, a girl whom I recognised to be one of the scrubbers of the house. She had got on a nurse's apron and cap. I immediately instituted inquiries, and found that the matron of the home was dressing-up the housemaids and employing them actually to attend the patients as though they were probationary nurses, and intending that these young women should go out afterwards as nurses. I was able to put a stop to it at once, but I am perfectly well aware that there are numerous instances, especially through the agency of nursing homes, where untrained girls ultimately pass out into the calling of nurses without proper training, and it is a common experience."

Thus this evil is of effects further-reaching than those touching the patients in the homes, serious for them as they may be. It means to say that unless great care is exercised—a very difficult matter in the urgent haste with which a nurse must often be summoned—one of these utterly untaught women may come to the bedside of our nearest and dearest, and be entrusted to carry out medical instructions upon which life itself will depend. "Did you say a teaspoonful or a tablespoonful of the drug to No. 7?" a patient heard called out in one very unsatisfactory establishment, and it set her thinking that if the drug was at all of a dangerous nature, the difference would be a very serious matter indeed for the unfortunate No. 7!

Neglect to answer bells is a frequent complaint from those who have been in these homes. When the "nurse" of, say, the second floor goes off duty, it has been no one's business to make any arrangements for the emergencies that may arise in her absence, and those in charge of, it may be, the first and third floors, regard it as a great favour if, entirely at their own convenience, they pay any attention to the summons from the second floor. Yet to the sufferer the matter may be of most imperative moment. An attack of faintness or nausea may be imminent, hæmorrhage may have set in, an important bandage or

dressing may have got out of place, causing discomfort or even acute pain. The delay may mean a set-back to recovery of most serious character, which the unqualified attendant does not in the least realise.



RHODODENDRONS.

Drawn by  
C. J. Vinc.

frozen kidneys! After paying porters to carry their purchases outside, and discharging the cab fare to convey their stores home, this woman boasted that the saving she thus effected was well worth while all this trouble to herself. One hardly likes to think of the staleness of the provisions before the next Saturday approached.

The cooking is another weak point in many homes of this order, and those who know how an invalid's capricious appetite must often be tempted by the most careful preparation and most dainty service will appreciate this failure. "The only thing I could ever take for breakfast at such and such a place was the porridge," explained one lady who requested her doctor to allow her to be moved as soon as possible. "The toast used to come up like leather, and a poached egg was so messy and uninviting," she continued. Fish woefully over-boiled instead of delicately steamed, cutlets fried and greasy instead of being carefully grilled, milk puddings burned, fruit hastily boiled up in sugar and water and called "stewed." These are only examples of the criticism you may hear if you happen to find yourself in the company of one or two who have recently had some experience of these establishments.

As an example of the risks patients run in some Nursing Homes, a lady who had undergone a most serious operation had underdone boiled pork sent up for her dinner on the second day that she was allowed to take solid food. Her husband, who was present when the dinner appeared, protested at such unwholesome food being served, and under such circumstances too! The matron admitted that the food was badly cooked, but said she could not help it as she had a very indifferent cook! The gentleman replied that the cook was nothing to do with him, but the food his wife ate *did* concern him; and he promptly had delicate and suitable food prepared by the cook at home and brought for his wife's consumption. But the matron protested that this was quite against the rules; the inmates must take the food provided by the Nursing Home. The moral of this appeared to be that it didn't matter in the

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least how the victim suffered in the end, so long as the rules of the establishment were observed!

This actually happened last year in a well-known and expensive London Nursing Home!

If it were a matter of underselling and competition to secure patients, such complaints would be comprehensible. The person, for instance, who expected to be cared for and tended in illness at a couple of guineas a week would not be entitled to look for soles and sweetbreads and grapes at four shillings a pound. But it may be taken for granted that no nursing-home charges less than four guineas a week, and this will only be in the suburbs, when the bedroom will be a very small one and the general standard of comfort such as might be defined as "cheap." Seven to twenty guineas a week are the much more usual figures, running sometimes to a higher figure still for very difficult surgical cases.

Yet the high fee is no guarantee whatever of either skilled nursing, good food and cooking, and attention to details.

"Probationers" are to be found in them, enabling the proprietors to make money in this way, as well as from the patients, who imagine that they will receive highly-skilled nursing. Some of the bitterest complaints as to the food and its service are heard concerning the most costly homes, where further charges are often made for "extras," as, for instance, the preparation of the room for an operation, which may be anything from ten shillings to three guineas. A fire all night—often an essential in lung and chest illness—frequently involves an additional expenditure, and anything in the way of medicines or surgical dressings outside the very simplest things are not included in the terms: stimulants and mineral waters are also charged extra, and sometimes fruit comes under this heading.

One dodge (it can be called nothing else) practised by certain nursing-homes is to make one special nurse attend to more than one case. For instance, a patient who is seriously ill and requiring constant attention will agree to a special nurse being engaged to attend to her, usually at a charge of three guineas a week; and she naturally supposes that by so doing the nurse is, for the time being, exclusively at her disposal. She has no idea that this same special nurse has also been allotted by another patient, who also requires constant attention (and who is also paying three guineas a week!).

A case recently came to my notice where two people in an expensive West-End nursing-home each paid for a special nurse, and had only one nurse assigned to the two. To aggravate the business, the patients were two floors apart. The nurse, only temporarily engaged by the matron, tried her best to divide her time between the two, so that each should have a certain amount

of companionship. But when the matron found that she was sitting in the rooms, just to help the patients get through some of the lonely hours that seem so interminable to the sufferer, she promptly forbade the nurse doing any such thing. Unless she was actually engaged in attending to the patient's personal requirements, she was to pass her spare time in a room on the landing; it would never do, she said, to sit with the patients; they would get to expect it too often.

One wonders what was the object, then, in paying for a special nurse.

Yet another, even more scandalous case, was that of a man who was in a critical condition, requiring careful watching day and night. He asked for special nurses to be engaged for night as well as day, and was charged accordingly. Imagine his amazement when he opened his eyes the first night, looked for the night nurse to attend to his needs, and found the same nurse who had been on duty by day asleep on a small folding bed placed beside his own! She was, of course, worn out with her day's work and in need of her night's rest. When he asked for whatever it was he required, all he got by way of reply was a drowsy command to keep quiet and go to sleep, as he didn't really need anything.

In ways such as these do some of the less reputable homes coin money.

Another undesirable feature about some of these ill-conducted homes is the eagerness of the nurses to secure "presents" for themselves. In well-managed homes it is, of course, discouraged, though matrons do not always absolutely forbid the practice, feeling that if a patient has enjoyed real care and attention and wishes to show the nurse an evidence of sincere gratitude, there is no reason it should not be done in an open and honourable manner. But with the uneducated and untrained women employed by others, the gift is regarded as a kind of rightful supplement to the wages below the understood rates. Nor is it uncommon for a nurse to ingratiate herself by humouring fads and requests that the doctor would not sanction, and then to talk of what her other grateful patients had done when she had, as she would express it, "understood"

what they wished, and she emphasises this by showing to the present victim the various forms of recognition of such services.

As an example of the way this giving of presents is literally asked for in some nursing homes, there is one I know of where the nurses as a matter of course pay the minimum amount of attention to a patient unless he be a man of means; in which case he is flattered and fawned upon to any extent, and as a result theatre tickets and presents constantly fall to the lot of the nurses. Of course, gentlewomen would not think of lowering themselves in any such way, but the nurses engaged by the

## A Prayer for Nurses

O God, our heavenly Father, we Thy children come now to Thy feet with our supplications. We cannot live without Thy blessing. Life is too hard for us and duty is too large. We get discouraged, and our feeble hands hang down. We come to Thee with our weakness, asking Thee for strength. Help us always to be of good cheer. Let us not be disheartened by difficulties. Let us never doubt Thy love or any of Thy promises. Give us grace to be encouragers of others, never discouragers. Let us not go about with sadness or fear among men, but may we be a benediction to everyone we meet, always making life easier, never harder, for those who come within our influence. Help us to be as Christ to others, that they may see something of His love in our lives and learn to love Him in us. We beseech Thee to hear us, to receive our prayer, and to forgive our sins, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

*J. R. Miller in "Great Souls at Prayer."*

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matron of this home are not gentlewomen. And yet the home itself is patronised by surgeons of high standing, who have no idea of the conditions that actually prevail there.

None feel more strongly than trained and devoted nurses themselves the discredit that such establishments bring upon their splendid profession. The public is too apt to judge all from the same standpoint, and the unworthy women, self-styled as nurses, are a source of grievous wrong to those of the high ideals and unswerving sense of duty that happily distinguish so large a proportion of its true members.

It is the untrained, undisciplined women who have brought the nurse's uniform into suspicion quite as much as those who assume it to cover aims and objects very evil indeed. In fact, at the present time there is a strong movement towards securing some kind of registration for nursing garb, which shall safeguard it from adoption by persons who have no right to wear it, in the same way as the uniforms of the Royal Navy and the Army are protected by the law, which not only forbids an actual assumption, but a colourable imitation of them.

It is not in this case necessary to be ranged with either side on the vexed question of the State Registration of nurses to realise that, as at present managed, too many of these homes are a source of downright danger to the community. Of course, everything appears spick and span before the physicians and surgeons when they visit their patients, and complaints from these are sometimes regarded perhaps as the querulousness of invalids. But they are far too general to be thus lightly dismissed.

The plain fact of the matter is that to a considerable number of women it sounds much more professional and dignified "to conduct a nursing home" than to be described as the landlady of an apartment house. Moreover, there are very much higher charges to be made for the rooms and promised attendance in the one case than the other. The hardship, however, falls upon the inmates.

If ordinary lodgings are dirty and ill-kept and the cooking is bad, you can pay your rent and leave. The sufferer weakened by illness, or in the critical after-stages of an operation, has no such independence. He or she has to remain even after the realisation that skilled attendance is not forthcoming, and that the food is doing nothing towards the re-establishment of strength, and it is for that reason that the delusive nursing home constitutes so heartless a form of danger in preying upon the helpless and stricken in their hours of need.

Moreover, the woman who lets ordinary apartments hopes to secure the return of her lodger or boarder, and in this way to establish a profitable connection. The proprietress of a nursing home knows that in the ordinary course of events the client is not likely to return to her year after year; one stay will probably be all that the average patient will make in her home. Once the patient is there, the dishonourable or callous matron does not trouble about her too much; she knows the victim is probably secure for a certain length of time; in any case when she goes it will be for good. What, need, therefore, to worry as to whether she is comfortable or not?

But even patients will "turn," like the proverbial worm, at times. I recently heard of a West-End nursing home, in which champagne suppers were the order of the night in the room of a rich bachelor, who was convalescent. To these the matron or the nurses went, in evening dress, and a regular orgy was kept up till the small hours of the morning. In the next room was a lady who had just undergone an extensive operation, and who vainly tried to get some sleep. So discreditable was the management of this home, that within less than a fortnight four different patients left, carried out on stretchers, accompanied by their own doctors, when they were not fit to be moved, so impossible was it to get proper attention in the place.

And as showing the style of the general management, in this home there was only one bedpan between eighteen patients; while the lavatory was so unsanitary that nurses could not allow the patients to go near it. This home charged from seven to twelve guineas a week—according to the size of the room!

As was said in the beginning, there *are* nursing homes that are all one could wish, and matrons and nurses who are a credit not only to their profession, but to the whole order of womanhood. But that it is not always easy to distinguish between the good and the bad nursing home, until one is tied within its doors, is a serious matter, and calls for the attention of the medical profession. It is a misfortune that nursing homes are not compelled to be in charge of a doctor, as is the case in some parts of Europe. This would at least secure competent oversight. By failing this, it is high time that official steps should be taken to prevent untrained women being put in charge of cases as serious as are most of those that enter nursing homes. That lives have been sacrificed again and again through the ignorance of those put to nurse the patients in ill-conducted nursing homes is a well-known fact. Why should not drastic measures be put forward to prevent the neglect of the weak and suffering that in some nursing homes positively attains to criminal dimensions?

### At Close of Day

LET our last thought of the evening be one of thanksgiving that, in the few hours of the day now ending, so much goodwill has been shown to us. There have been well-wishers, ready to further every effort of our hands and responsive to each impulse of our friendliness. We have received much kindness within a little time. It is not permitted us to doubt the good in all men when those whom we know have helped us to happiness. Let us be glad of the peaceful home—the shelter itself shutting out the night of storm—and the loyalty of the comrades, housed with us from the loneliness of life, giving of their steady affection. Let us be comforted, knowing that we shall sleep in peace, forgiven for our shortcomings, and that we shall waken to work and the fresh chances of the morning, with failure forgotten and the scene newly set for our endeavour.



