LETTERS FROM PHYSICIANS.

FROM DR. J. S. BILLINGS.

Washington, D. C., January 20, 1894.

Dear Doctor :

In accordance with my promise, I send the following replies to your queries :

I. I do not think the present asylum management of the insane in America is as good as it might be.

II. My objections to it are :

1. In most of the large State asylums for the insane the means of caring for those forms of insanity which are susceptible of improvement by treatment, probably do not produce as good results as those employed in private asylums, or by specialists, for persons able to pay for such superior treatment. This is merely an opinion, based on knowledge of some special cases. There are no statistical data on this point.

2. These asylums have contributed very little to advancement in knowledge as to the causes, pathology and best treatment of the various forms of insanity in view of the opportunities which their officers have had, and as compared with the results obtained in asylums in Europe. The causes of this appear to me to have been :

1. That the officials of such asylums obtain and hold their positions, in a large majority of cases, through political influence, and without reference to their qualifications as experts in the treatment of insanity. This does not apply to the asylums not under State or Government control.

2. That the energies of the well-qualified asylum superintendents have been heretofore largely directed towards increased accommodation for the insane, and that their duties as administrative officers, charged with the planning and erection of new building and with the details of asylum management, have left them little time or opportunity for scientific investigations, or for making themselves acquainted with what has been done by others in the diagnosis and treatment of insanity.

3. To insufficient appropriations for the support of

asylums, making it impossible to obtain a sufficient number of such skilled and trained attendants as are necessary to secure the best results by individualizing the treatment.

III. In reply to your third question, I would say that I would wish that the position of superintendent of an asylum for the insane should be entirely independent of politics and politicians, and that the best man for the place should be appointed, regardless of whether he is a resident of the State or not. This might be done through the United States Civil Service Commission.

I would have the superintendent a medical man, but the treatment of the cases and the scientific work of the institution should be in other hands. I would separate, as far as possible, the hopelessly incurable cases from those which might be expected to yield good results to treatment, and concentrate upon these last the expenditure for experts, skilled nurses, and for special appliances and comforts.

I would provide greater facilities and inducements than now exist to have well-educated, young medical men employed as assistants in the clinical work of asylums.

For asylums near large cities, I would have a consulting staff of physicians, *i. e.*, specialists.

Yours respectfully,

J. S. BILLINGS.

FROM DR. C. L. DANA.

New York, February 9, 1894.

Dear Dr. Mitchell:

With reference to your inquiries regarding the management of insane asylums in America, I should say, "No" to your first question, but then nothing is quite perfect and a negative answer means little.

The special defects vary greatly in different States, and something must be considered and allowed for new social organizations and a busy and a not very wealthy population. I refer now especially to many southern and western institutions.

I believe that all over the country the great trouble is that the people do not understand what a difficult, costly and important problem the care of the insane is. Hence comes the evil of political management and as a result