

THE NEED FOR WOMEN AS POOR LAW GUARDIANS.

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[Read in the Section of State Medicine, February 1, 1895.]

I HOPE that the subject of my paper will not be considered outside the scope of the Section of State Medicine. The position and difficulties of doctors who are serving the State under the Poor Law Acts have often been discussed here, and as my subject concerns the composition of the Board which appoints the dispensary and workhouse doctors, and which controls the management and nursing of the workhouse hospitals, I think it may fairly lie within our province. In England, under the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, there is no technical disqualification on the ground of sex to prevent women serving on Boards of Guardians, and yet for forty years after the passing of the Act no woman presented herself for election. Under the stimulus of the wider outlook which more advanced education gave them, women looked abroad for fields of usefulness and work beyond their own immediate homes, and in 1875 a woman came forward as a poor law guardian in Kensington and was elected. Since then the number of women guardians has increased at every election. In 1887 there were 50, and this year there are over 800. Their work has received the unqualified approval both of the ratepayers and the Local Government Board, and anyone who has followed the recent series of articles in the *British Medical Journal* on English workhouses will have

observed that even that conservative journal notes the benefit of having women on the Boards.

In Ireland the Acts relating to Poor Law administration are different from those of England, and the fundamental Act—that of 1838—contains the words “male person” in the description of the qualifications of a guardian. This expression was probably inserted quite inadvertently; it had not then dawned upon the minds of law-makers that women might want a share in administration. Standing as it does, however, it of course excludes women absolutely until a short amending clause can be put through Parliament, and in the press of other business it is very difficult to get that done. Several attempts have been made to pass such a clause. Last year a bill was introduced by a Unionist member and was supported by nearly the whole Nationalist Party, but one member blocked it and it failed to become law. When one examines the duties of guardians it seems extraordinary that women should only of late years have taken up the work in England, and that they are not allowed to serve in this capacity in Ireland, for the management of the workhouse is in a very large measure a matter of household management, such as every woman is accustomed to perform or supervise in her own home. The average man does not pretend to be able to do housekeeping on a small scale—to look after the cooking of the food, the cleaning of the house, the clothing of the children, &c., that is usually conceded to lie outside his sphere. But incompetence to manage a small household seems to be a qualification for the post of managing a large one, contrary to the usual rules in such cases.

Among some of the duties which Boards of Guardians have to perform, and in which surely they would find a woman's knowledge of service, are the following:—

(1.) Engagement of officials, the majority of whom—matron, nurses, and servants—are women.

(2.) Superintending the quality of the material and the making of the clothes for the women and children.

(3.) Inspection of the supplies sent in, to see that they fulfil the contract requirements, and inspection of the food, to see that it is properly cooked and served.

(4.) Inspection of the infants and children, to see that they are well fed and cared for.

(5.) Inspection of beds, bed linen, and towels.

All these matters a woman is accustomed to see to as a matter of routine in her own house, and she is trained to notice them, and if they are badly done to have them set right. It is no question of special professional training, it is a question of using the training and habits of home in a wider field and on a larger scale; the essentials are the same. It is often said that women are unbusinesslike, and this might be urged as an objection to their undertaking the more extensive work of a guardian, but business habits are largely a matter of training, and most women who have to organise and manage their households have a very fair idea of business in their own line at least, though they may not understand stocks and shares. They are also often more economical than men, because they are accustomed to deal with smaller sums of money. Besides, it is not proposed that any Board should be entirely feminine—I believe in the co-operation of men and women here as elsewhere; what I wish to urge is the very great need for one or two women on each Board to assist and give advice in matters concerning the women and children and domestic affairs. And as I believe that nearly four-fifths of the paupers are women and children, this does not seem a very unreasonable proposal. As examples of what women have done as guardians in England during the last 20 years, I may instance the following points:—

(1.) Investigation into the clothing of the women and children. The women were found in many cases to wear

the same clothes in all seasons of the year, and suffered greatly from the cold in winter. The children too were often insufficiently and uncomfortably clad.

(2.) In many cases the workhouse school has been abolished and the children are sent to the nearest Board school and allowed to play and mix with the children there, in order that they may be as free from pauper associations as possible. This has everywhere been found to be of the greatest advantage to the children physically and mentally, besides saving the cost of a separate school.

(3.) Pocket handkerchiefs have been provided for the inmates, adults, and children. This is not a very extravagant or luxurious addition to their toilette requisites, but it is one which is still lacking in many workhouses, and though it is a small matter, on the score of cleanliness, at least, it seems desirable.

(4.) Careful supervision is carried out concerning the facilities for washing, and provision made that each person should have fresh water and a separate towel. Inspection is made of the women's baths and sanitary conveniences.

(5.) Frequent inspection is made of the nurseries to see that the infants' bottles are kept clean and the children well looked after. Old pauper women are found as unsatisfactory for this work as in workhouse hospitals, and in several places paid attendants have been substituted.

(6.) Properly trained nurses for the hospitals are being gradually recognised as absolutely necessary, and in several cases the lady-guardians have been instrumental in bringing about this change. They also supervise the nurses' rooms, and see that they have good food, open-air exercise, and holidays at suitable times.

(7.) In many of the cases concerning women which come before the Board, such as that of the unmarried girls who have been recently confined in the hospital, the women-

guardians have done good work in assisting them to employment where they can redeem their characters, or putting them into communication with charitable institutions where they can be trained. In some of the larger Boards these questions are relegated to a sub-committee of ladies.

(8.) Boarding-out or emigration of children, and proper inspection of them when boarded out, have also been taken up recently by the women, as well as inspection in asylums of female lunatics sent from the district.

(9.) Also the supervision of the training of the girls for service, and finding suitable situations for them when ready, not merely sending them to the first place that offers, is work that the women-guardians do.

While some of the above reforms represent increased expenditure, the women have been able to exercise economy in other matters so as to have the paupers better treated and with less expense. In the matter of the able-bodied male paupers and tramps, however, it has been noted on several Boards that the women-guardians incline to making treatment even more severe and deterrent than it is. Their sympathies are not with this class, but with the sick, the aged, and the children.

For all these matters a great deal of individual attention to the cases and the household details is necessary, and that is another point where the value of women as public servants in this capacity comes in, as the women who devote themselves to the work have generally a good deal of leisure. The men who are guardians have not the necessary time to give to these matters, even if they possessed the intimate knowledge of the points mentioned that women have.

It is often laid to women's charge as a fault, that they cannot take a broad and extensive view of a subject—they cannot see the wood for the trees. But this characteristic is a virtue here, for it is only by personal attention to

individual cases that success in the administration of the poor laws can be obtained. It is shown clearly by the revelations about barrack schools, for instance, and other large institutions, that no system and no regulations, however carefully framed, are successful in dealing with masses of people, unless wisely and conscientiously and kindly carried out. In the circular issued recently by the English Local Government Board, this is strongly emphasised in the following words:—"All experience shows that whether a workhouse is well or ill-administered depends to a large extent on the personal interest which the guardians take in the matter." This circular is described by an English paper as "The Pauper's Charter," and it certainly marks the change in people's ideas compared with former times as to the way the destitute poor should be treated. Women-guardians have also done a great deal towards humanising the workhouses by having the wards brightened with pictures and flowers, by providing toys for the children, and interesting easy employment for the old people in connection with the Brabazon scheme. In many of these alterations women have called in the assistance of various charitable societies, so that the schemes of private and State benevolence co-operate instead of overlapping.

Surely if women have found so much work to do in English workhouses, and have been able to do it with considerable success, there is also work for them to do in Ireland if they were allowed to try, and I believe that suitable women could be found in most of the districts. It is a post for which tact and judgment and sound common sense are required, as well as plenty of time to devote to the work, and there would, of course, be initial difficulties, but they are not insurmountable. The question of religious differences would probably come into this as it does into everything in Ireland, and I believe there have been unfortunate instances of

injudiciousness on the part of some lady-visitors to work-houses. But women-guardians would differ from the visitors in being elected by the ratepayers, not arbitrarily appointed, and they would be publicly responsible for their actions. I believe the fact of public responsibility would make all the difference, and women have too long been allowed to use the dangerous tool of influence without responsibility.

The State takes upon itself the duty of caring for the destitute both in health and disease, and medical science is advancing more and more every year along the lines of prevention rather than cure. In the furtherance of these aims I believe the doctors who work under the Poor Law would find women-guardians strong allies in all matters of sanitation and hygiene as well as nursing.

DR. ROCHE thought that the election of ladies to this post might cause more human sympathy to be indulged in towards the young and the old feeble inmates of workhouses. He had no sympathy at all for the able-bodied inmate and the tramp.

DR. DELAHAYDE said that the Acts relating to the Poor Law system were passed nearly half a century ago; that during this time the country had changed, and that they were now unsuitable. They bore eloquent testimony to O'Connell, who prophesied that it would bring about the demoralisation of the country. He considered that the Boards of Guardians had also degenerated. Their members were not now the broad-minded and educated gentlemen who used to sit on them. The present members paid very little attention to any suggestion from their medical officers, and tried to repress them whenever they get a chance. Since he had listened to Miss Dickson's paper, he viewed in a much more favourable light the election of lady guardians.

DR. NORMAN said he thought that the power should be given to ladies to serve as guardians. There was little doubt but that it would be greatly to the benefit of the poor. It would also be more easy to manage the female officials if there were lady guardians.

DR. DOYLE briefly expressed his approval of Miss Dickson's paper and his sympathies with the substance of it. He thought the Poor

Law system needed to be completely amended to get rid of the jobbery at present existing in it.

DR. S. M. THOMPSON said that he had found that the present members of Poor Law Boards frequently gave more time to their work than their wealthy predecessors. They had, of course, a very poor idea of the position of their medical officers, but with time and experience this would improve. There was no doubt about the frightful amount of jobbery that existed in some workhouses. He had also met with some glaring instances of a matron treating with shameful leniency an untrustworthy female assistant.

DR. POTTER said he agreed with Dr. Dickson that it would be an immense advantage to country workhouses to have lady guardians. He was on the committee of a Dublin hospital on which there were some ladies and gentlemen. He found that in many points the ladies were able to be of much more use than men.

DR. DICKSON, in replying, stated that she hoped the present Poor Law system would soon be abolished, but that in the meantime she thought some amelioration of the system would be of much service. The English Boards of Guardians will probably soon be merged in the Parish Councils. A workhouse matron, if she were of the right sort, would be very glad to have lady guardians with whom she could consult.