The Public Health Nurse*

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For a good many years I have been both interested in and personally concerned with various aspects of the great public health movement and it is inevitable that anyone who has had that experience should come into touch with the nursing profession generally, and more particularly with the visiting nurse, and in these later years with the public health nurse with all that that term and that individual mean for the general welfare.

I remember very vividly the beginning of the organized campaign against tuberculosis in this country and how we conceived of that first as a campaign of education. It was a matter of mass education. It was based upon the dramatic discoveries of medical science and their obviously possible application to the prevention of disease and to the administration of that application by public health authorities. We must remember that in those earlier days the conceptions of public health administration were rather crude. Of course there were certain essential things recognized—a pure water supply, a pure milk supply, etc.—but public health officers busied themselves chiefly with minor and not very important things. I sometimes used to feel that they were often more concerned with what were rather esthetic considerations, such as sewer gas and other malodorous emanations. The objects were rather unpleasant but were not very dangerous.

Then came a completely new conception. And in this tuberculosis campaign we found, I say, that the first thing to be accomplished was the education of the public. But soon we began to realize that after all it is not simply the education of the masses, except for the creation of a public opinion that would support official effort, that was necessary. But in the last instance if we were to get results we must come down to the individual and to his individual health habits. And the individual in his health habits is not to be reached effectively by the propaganda of organized agencies; he is going to be reached by the individual. And so we came to realize that the essential individual in this work was the visiting nurse, that there was nothing quite equal to her and her possibilities in the application of the knowledge of which I have just spoken.

In saying that, one recognizes, of course, the indispensability of the medical profession and of the public health officials and of an enlightened public opinion.

Now what we found in the field of tuberculosis was found in the same way in the organized campaign against that civic blot of infant and child mortality, as well as in the case of various preventable or infectious diseases. We are seeing it now in certain of the enemies

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that disable mankind; for example in the present campaign, too long delayed, which is being inaugurated on a wide scale against venereal disease. Other countries have demonstrated what can be done in checking the spread of syphilis and I am sure comparable results can be obtained in this country. And there remains another equally important challenge, and that is the whole field of mental hygiene, which calls for organized consideration in the same way.

Laboratories discover facts and it is one of the dramatic achievements of modern times that medical science has advanced as it has. And it is most encouraging that public authorities are coming to recognize that there must be created and maintained highly intelligent and competent official agencies with adequate resources to apply to the public welfare the facts and truths that have been discovered by medical science and whose applicability has been demonstrated by the medical profession. And in my judgment the agency that brings this possibility to a focus and accomplishes results is the public health nurse. I am very glad indeed of the opportunity of saying that as I have watched it from the sidelines during these 30 odd years I have come more and more to feel that without the public health nurse the efforts are ineffective.

To my mind one of the greatest events that have taken place in this country was that to which allusion has been made more than once this afternoon. That was the establishment in 1893 of the Henry Street Settlement. I wish to add my tribute to what Miss Wald has accomplished there, not simply as a contribution to New York City but to the entire country and to the world. From that beginning has grown this great movement that we celebrate today.

Miss Fox in her remarks, and particularly in her closing words pointing toward the future, emphasized the necessity of the adequate preparation of the public health nurse and the production of a much larger number of them. The problem today in my judgment in the whole public health field is the lack of adequate personnel, and I am speaking of the medical personnel as well as of the trained official and the public health nurse. There are communities today ready to take steps and there are not competent people to staff the effort. Further, with the development of the Social Security Act and its application in the future throughout this country, this need will become greater and more obvious. There has been a tendency to think that any person who has gone through a certain course, whether in medicine, or, in the case of a nurse, through a nursing school and has acquired those magical letters "R.N.," is entirely adequate, entirely competent to take up this line of activity. The public health nurse to be successful demands qualities that are called for by no other group in the nursing field. The bedside nurse of course must be competent, but the task of the public health nurse calls not only for the training of an R.N. but for something more. In my judgment the public health nurse cannot be too highly trained. I can share the opinion of certain of my medical colleagues that we can do in certain cases of illness with nurses of less complete training but we cannot do without nurses of the highest quality and the highest training in this public health field. I would like to see more and more college women coming into the nursing schools, passing through them, taking up postgraduate work, and specializing in this public health field.

Now is it any wonder that, having come through these long years of watch-
ing and deep interest in the application of knowledge to the different fields of public health, I should welcome the opportunity of paying my tribute to what the public health nurse has done and to what the National Organization for Public Health Nursing has accomplished in leading the way and demonstrating the possibilities? That this organization is needed is beyond all question. That it will develop and grow is equally certain and necessary. My congratulations are to the N.O.P.H.N. for what it has already accomplished and I bid it God-speed for the future.

REFERENCES