

Psychiatry in the 1880s

The Foundations of Psychiatric Nurse Training

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The gradual transition from unqualified attendant to the trained psychiatric nurse of the present day was described in detail by Walk.¹ A key turning point in this story occurred at the Quarterly Meeting of the Medico-Psychological Association in Edinburgh on 16 November 1883, when Dr A. Campbell Clark, Medical Superintendent of the Glasgow District Asylum, read a paper entitled 'The special training of asylum attendants'. This paper was published in the *Journal of Mental Science* in January 1884.² Whilst attention had been given by many other asylum doctors to the training of attendants,^{3,4} Clark's experience of organizing attendant training courses and his firm recommendations opened the way to practical steps which set training on a new footing. Clark acknowledged the work of Dr T. S. Clouston, Physician Superintendent of the Royal Edinburgh Asylum, who read a paper to the annual meeting of the Association in 1876 entitled 'On the question of getting, training, and retaining the services of good asylum attendants'.⁵ This paper aroused a good deal of interest amongst members of the Association, and a small committee was formed to report 'on the advisability of the formation of an association or registry of attendants in connection with this Association and the best manner of carrying it into effect'.⁶ However, there is no record of any report by this committee.

Clark revealed considerable respect for attendants and expressed the view that 'too great a barrier existed between officers and attendants... that the mental and moral qualities of attendants were not utilized so fully as they might be [and] that attendants require to be individualized as well as patients'. He described the contemporary status of attendants and emphasized the importance of training and recruitment.

Undoubtedly the status of an attendant is at present an inferior one in the industrial scale. Some common popular notions are that the rougher and stronger the material the better is the attendant; that it is not a trade for men, and is suited only for the coarser types of women; that it leads to nothing reliable or desirable as a permanent occupation; and that as a life-work it is not sufficiently respectable to satisfy an average ambition. These and other considerations materially affect the supply of good attendants. Seeing, therefore, that in attendants themselves we find the best advertisement, and through them may command the highest success, it is worth considering, whether or not it is

possible for us to advertise asylums, in such a way as to attract to them the better raw material which we crave so much after, and which we need so much. If the public mind must be educated to better purpose we must go upon a *new tack*. We shall require to bring more elevating influences to bear upon our attendants. In raising their social and industrial status we shall raise them in the estimation of the public and themselves, and may reasonably expect a more marketable article by-and-by. It is surely fair, in the interest of all concerned, that attendants should receive from us the best possible training of which they are capable. There is reason enough for it in this, that as medical helps they will then develop more fully, and their work will become a life-work worthy of the name.

At the Glasgow District Asylum, Clark introduced courses of lectures for attendants, with a concluding examination, and the following extract describes how the first course was conducted.

It was found convenient to write on the black-board an abstract of each lecture before its delivery. The attendants were allowed half an hour to copy this abstract, and thereafter about half an hour was taken up in discussing the several heads of it *seriatim*. In this way the class was able to devote its whole attention to the lecture without the distressing interruption of having to take notes. This plan succeeded fairly well, though I am free to admit that the preliminary note-taking involved a severe strain on some attendants. A printed abstract would obviate this, and make the lectures much more enjoyable. Diagrams were freely had recourse to, and proved exceedingly useful. Two written examinations were held. At these the questions were stated in as homely language as possible, and a few blank lines were allowed after each to give room for the answers. The following are examples of questions: (1) What is the meaning of the word function? Show by an example that you understand it. (2) What should be done with an epileptic when he is seized with a fit? State your reasons. (3) What risks does an epileptic run? Other questions were suggested by lectures on general paralysis, puerperal insanity, the treatment of epilepsy and epileptic insanity, the treatment of bed-sores, etc. The result of these examinations was an agreeable surprise, and it was also a disappointment to me. The more practical questions were answered rightly or wrongly by every one. The anatomical and physiological ones were answered by only about one-half of those present, and the answers were fairly good. The number of lectures was 18 (14 being for mixed classes), and the average attendance was 20 out of a staff of 26, the defaulters being non-residents and tradesmen. It was not made compulsory. The attendance at examinations was—first examination, 15; second examination, 17. Attendance at 14 lectures, and 65 per cent or

over entitled to a first-class certificate. Attendance at 12 lectures, and 35 per cent or over entitled to a second-class certificate. The results were as follows: Seven received over 65 per cent; four received under 65 and over 35 per cent; and eight received under 35 per cent. The failures were chiefly among the males, and this in spite of the energetic support of the male officers. They were often due to sadly deficient education, rarely to want of natural ability, though sometimes to want of ambition.

Clark encouraged the Medico-Psychological Association to endorse his pioneering steps and to foster attendant training generally. He conveyed a sense of urgency for change since 'knowledge of insanity and its appropriate treatment is growing apace'. He drew attention to changing asylum practice, particularly the trend towards 'individualizing' patients, but he made clear that 'the attendants are not sufficiently trained and elevated to fit into the new order of things . . . If our asylums are to be more like hospitals, our attendants, like hospital nurses, must be specially trained'. He concluded his paper with the following four suggestions.

First: I would suggest that by authority of the Medico-Psychological Association a simple and merely tentative arrangement should be come to whereby those superintendents who are willing to give the experiment a fair trial shall enter into a combination for two years at least.

Second: That this combination shall merely experiment to the extent of supplying a special training, not compulsory, consisting of lectures in winter and ward teaching so far as the exigencies of their respective asylums will allow, and also to the extent of furnishing a special certificate, first, second, or third class, according to efficiency and duration of service.

Third: That a register of attendants who have received certificates be printed and circulated at the end of two or three years, by authority and at the expense of the Association.

Fourth: That the gentlemen forming the combination constitute a Committee, empowered to make arrangements and rules for the carrying out of such an experimental scheme.

A committee of the medical officers of the asylums of Scotland was formed, following Clark's paper, to consider the special training and instruction of asylum attendants and the preparation of an instruction manual for nursing and attendance on the insane.⁷ The first printed proof and copy

of the *Handbook for the Instruction of Attendants on the Insane* was presented to the Association in 1885 and, subsequently, it was published by Messrs Baillière, Tindall, and Cox of London.⁸ The second edition was published in 1893 and, by this time, responsibility for this manual had been accepted fully by the Association. In 1890, approval was given to proposals in a Report by the Nursing Committee⁹ for instituting by the Association, a system of training of attendants, examinations and the granting of certificates of proficiency,¹⁰ and the first examinations were held the following year. A voluntary register of nurses holding the MPA Certificate was established by the Association. However, it was not until the Nurses' Registration Act of 1919 (9 & 10 Geo 5 c 94) that nurses trained in asylums achieved some recognition by being included in a supplementary part of the register kept by the newly formed General Nursing Council.

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