LECTURES ON NURSING.

LECTURE I.

You all know that the cure and care of the sick and injured depend mainly upon doctors and nurses.

The science of medicine and the art of nursing materially assist each other in their ultimate objects; i.e., of the cure where that is possible, and, failing that, of the alleviation of suffering.

I want you fully to recognize the wide distinction, both in kind and in degree, between the knowledge necessary for a doctor and the knowledge necessary for a nurse, that you may have a clear and definite idea in your minds of what a “trained nurse” should know and be, and that you may not waste time and energy in endeavouring to acquire the sort of information that will not be of real service to you in your own distinct work.

When you reflect for a moment what a complicated machine the human body is, and what a vast amount there is to be learned respecting it, you will not find it difficult to believe that years of study are not sufficient to attain a complete knowledge of it. There is the study of anatomy, which teaches us what the body is; i.e., its general structure, size, weight, and so on. The relationship and position of each
separate organ, how and of what material each part is made;—this alone, with the daily advancing discoveries of science, is an inexhaustible source of study. The same may be said of physiology, which is the science that teaches us what the body does; i.e., how the heart beats, for instance, and how the different organs work. Then the chemical composition of the body—the various elements of which it is composed, and how the various tissues are affected by different things. This forms the third science which is essential to the understanding of the human body—first, in its healthy condition, and next under the varied morbid conditions of disease. But when all this is known, it only becomes the groundwork upon which the doctor builds his subsequent studies into the nature of disease, how to find it out, how to prevent it, and how to cure it.

It is evident that the most studious nurses can only gain a superficial knowledge of all these subjects, and fortunately it is not necessary that they should be thoroughly acquainted with them. But it is essential that you should know those points in each science that will materially assist you in the cultivation and understanding of the art of nursing itself.

It is very desirable that you should have a clear idea of what a doctor is, and what relation you, as nurses, bear to him. The doctor, when called to a sick person, first turns his attention to finding out what is the matter. This may be very obvious, such as a broken leg, an epileptic fit, or an attack of measles, or it may require a good deal of examining and questioning on his part. When once he has made a diagnosis, as it is called, or ascertained in what way the patient is affected, he proceeds to determine a plan for the treatment of the case, and, if need be, to prevent any spread of disease to those about. Up to this point, you as nurses have no place. In the subsequent conduct of the case, it will be your part to efficiently carry out the doctor's orders,
and to intelligently and carefully observe, for the purpose of reporting with absolute accuracy, what occurs in the doctor's absence. It is by educating your perceptive faculties in this direction that you may become of such valuable assistance in aiding the cure and alleviation of the sick. But important, and very important, as it is that you should be strictly accurate in such points, it is, after all, as agents in administering a system of relief to the patient that you find your place. In the treatment of the case you have your work.

A plan, based upon scientific principles, is laid down by the doctor to himself, and he entrusts much of the carrying out of that plan to you. Hence, at the outset, you see that your work is of no mean order, and that you are placed in a responsible position, requiring intelligence and skill; that, in fact, you are the practisers of an art, now acknowledged to be such, and which depends for much of its advancement upon you. No doctor can refuse to learn of some matters from a nurse, for he is conscious of her greater familiarity with, and even of her greater aptitude in, many details; but he will most properly resent any interference on her part with those subjects which are within his own sphere. Hence it comes that you have to consider the methods of administering relief. How to make poultices, and how to put them on; not why and when, that rests with the doctor. How best a patient may be made comfortable in bed, and how that bed may be made; not why he should go to bed, nor how long he should remain there.

Your work as sisters and nurses is neither to rival nor interfere with that of doctors; but in every sense to help them. Is not nursing so distinctly a woman's work, chiefly because it is helping work, if it is rightly done? This has been, or should be, the characteristic of woman's work from the Creation; so it is by no means taking a lower standard for
ourselves to acknowledge this, or rather to aim that it should be so, and I think in working we cannot do better than keep this idea in our minds.

Scrupulously avoid anything which approaches to amateur doctoring, not only for your own sake, but for the sake of the whole nursing profession. It prejudices all who come in contact with it against the education of nurses, and is held in as much contempt by all really accomplished nurses as any other sort of quackery is by duly qualified practitioners.

You must not think, because I am anxious to put you on your guard against those errors which bring so much discredit upon trained nurses, that I am inclined to underrate the importance of your work. On the contrary, I am desirous for you to realize that it ultimately depends not upon the public, but upon yourselves, whether you will let yourselves be universally considered efficient helps, and be valued and respected accordingly, or whether you will prove yourselves unworthy and incompetent to fill the satisfactory position which is now open to you.

I want you to think very seriously of the work you have taken up. It is not easy nor insignificant. If you are tempted to fancy so, think of the power which rests in your hands. How completely all the doctor’s efforts for his patients may be frustrated by careless carrying out, or neglect of his orders, and how terrible the consequences may be! Life may be literally lost, or suffering cruelly increased by ignorant or inefficient nursing. So very much depends upon you that you can scarcely exaggerate the importance of making yourselves in every way fit for the trust which is reposed in you. If, on the other hand, you measure your work by its difficulties, by the patient courage which it demands from you, by the real strength of character which it takes to go on quietly doing the sometimes disagreeable and often wearisome duties which fall to your share day after day, or night after night, as the
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case may be, you will not be inclined to say that nursing is work that “anybody can do.”

We hear of people being “born nurses,” as though some favoured mortals came into the world with an instinctive knowledge of the subject; but experience shows us that this is not exactly the case. Doubtless some have much greater natural gifts for nursing than others; but this, like other arts, such as music or painting, must be carefully cultivated, studied, and practised, before satisfactory results can be produced, and the real talent, which some are fortunate enough to possess, is duly developed.

I would have you set a very high standard before you, and earnestly resolve that you will not rest satisfied with attaining anything short of the very best. Your object must be to do everything connected with your patients in such a manner as never to give them the least unnecessary pain or discomfort. It is worth while taking a great deal of trouble over quite a small detail—and to take trouble is not necessarily to take time, for to be gentle as well as quick is a habit gained by proper training—if by so doing you can cause less suffering; and the knowledge that you are able to do this, is one of the greatest pleasures you will derive from becoming skilful.

Unless you are prepared to be very patient and pain-taking over all the innumerable “little things,” your work will never be thoroughly “trustworthy,” and consequently no credit to yourselves or others. You must endeavour to learn and to do as much as you possibly can, and not rest contented with “as little.”

You have chosen a profession in which there is simply no limit to the good you can do. Strive to see what your opportunities are, and then take care not to waste them. You are working in a public institution, where all you do and say, and all that you yourselves are, has a wider influence for good or evil than it would do in the narrower home circle, and we
cannot alter this fact by shutting our eyes to it. As nursing is so pre-eminently the woman’s profession, what sort of women must you not resolve to be?

If only all of you could understand, when you enter a hospital, that henceforth in a double sense you must “walk worthy of the vocation wherewith you are called,” it would be very helpful to you, and it could scarcely fail to have a beneficial influence on your work. Let it make you the more careful, too, to remember that each one amongst you, individually, is more or less responsible for the credit of the whole institution. If any one of you behaves in such a way as to disgrace the uniform you wear, all the others suffer for it in the general estimation.

Each one of you who wins our certificate of training will have it in your power to make us proud of your connection with us in the future, or very sadly the reverse. You know how rejoiced men are when a member of their hospital or college has won distinction of any kind, and how they feel that his credit reflects itself to an extent upon them. Let it be the same with you. Many of you can be first-rate. It rests with you to make up your minds that you will be; and having done so, how are you to set to work?

I would have you consider a little some practical details concerning this much-talked-of hospital training, and such reflection will probably help you to banish a few of those pre-conceived notions concerning it which are apt to stand in the way of beginners. If you think of the subject as a whole, I believe you will share the opinion of those who have given much careful thought to the matter, and freely admit that it would be difficult to conceive any system more calculated to produce good results than the one adopted here. The fact that you have perfectly regular and uninterrupted courses of lectures on nursing, and that each one of you is enabled to attend them all, is not a small advantage. Then the division
of these lectures into three sets, not only gives each branch of your work due consideration, but of necessity, on a subject of limited extent like nursing, it involves the repetition by each lecturer of a great deal that has been said before, combined with the new matter set before you, and this repetition of essential details can scarcely fail to impress them upon your minds. In addition to these lectures you have an increasingly good library on the subject that you are here to study, and every facility is afforded for you to avail yourselves of it, so that even without your practical work in the wards your theoretical knowledge of nursing should be excellent. The combination of this with the advantage of actual personal experience in the wards, has not only the merit of being invaluable in itself, but adds at the same time a double interest to the theory of your art, and leaves little else to be provided for the efficiency of your training. The success of these means must rest in a great measure upon your application of them individually, and in cases where they fail to produce a good result there must be either the want of capacity to excel or a grave error in the method with which you have set to work.

It seems to me that some of you expect to be taught exactly as though you were children. In teaching a child we should frequently pause to ascertain how much had been understood; we should keep more or less to one point until it was learnt perfectly, and if no pains were taken we might say that nothing else should be done until the lesson was accomplished. Obviously that is not a system by which hospital nursing could be taught, any more than it is a subject which children could study; and it is desirable that you should each have a clear idea in your minds of the way in which you are to acquire proficiency. Children frequently have no desire to learn. Presumably not one of you would be here unless you had made up your mind, for some reason
or other, that you wished to be trained. If I may apply a very homely simile to the matter, perhaps I may make my meaning clear to you. If a dish of knowledge is placed before you, you, being grown-up women, and wishing for this knowledge, must help yourselves to it, or go away without any. If you were little children we should feel it a duty to go round with a spoon and feed you, and in that case we should provide food for that process. As it is, we cannot force you to swallow it; such a proceeding would neither be polite nor practicable. It is not possible for us to do more than prepare this knowledge for your use in as palatable a form as we are able, and entreat each one of you to partake of as much as you possibly can. I say this to you that you may recognize the value of your opportunities at the beginning, in order to avail yourselves of them. We can do everything short of making you learn; that you must do for yourselves. If you do not clearly understand what you are told, make a point of asking questions about it until you do. Perhaps it may not be convenient to do so immediately; but then keep a rough note-book, and make memoranda of the things you want to know, until a good opportunity offers of getting them explained. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to attempt to solve some of your individual difficulties for you; but before I can do this, you yourselves must take the trouble to tell me what they are. Ask the sisters or your fellow-workers, or any one you like, but find out somehow, and persevere until you know. Do not rest satisfied with having asked, remember, until you are confident that you understand the matter so well that you could explain it to another. It is not in the least discreditable to you to display ignorance on the most commonplace detail of nursing now. You are not expected to know anything about it to begin with, even if it happens that you do. If you knew all about hospital nursing it is not to be supposed
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that you would devote at least two years of your life, as the majority of you intend, to the study of it; so do not let any fear of being laughed at for not knowing keep you from asking questions, and do not be discouraged from asking again in other directions if your attempts to find out what you wish to know have been unsuccessful. It is no disgrace to be ignorant now, but you will not be able to say the same at the end of your training, if you have failed to acquire what it was your duty to learn. If when it is your turn to teach—and remember every certificated nurse becomes an authority on the subject, at least to those who know nothing of it—if when you are asked the simple questions that you have a right to be asking yourselves now, you cannot give information to others because you have been too careless, too apathetic, or too silly to ask for it, I think then you might well be ashamed to confess that "you do not know."

If I have made myself clear to you, I can only beg you all to make up your minds to set about learning in the right way, and realize to what an important extent the quality of your training depends upon yourselves. We will not fail to do our part, and I want you to begin by doing your very best, applying your brightest energies to the task you have undertaken, with plenty of hope and courage to start with, and a good supply of steady perseverance to carry you through.

It is your first object to do your own duty faithfully and well, but do not forget that you must also help your fellow-workers to the utmost of your power. I have often heard both sisters and nurses exclaim, "I never shall forget my first day in a hospital!" Yet I am sometimes tempted to think they must forget very completely or be sadly deficient in sympathy, when they can fail to give a thoroughly cordial, friendly greeting to every new beginner with whom they come in contact. As I am addressing probationers chiefly, the recollection of your first appearance must still be fresh in your
minds, and I hope for the sake of others that you will keep it so to some purpose. If you have been fortunate enough to be received in a kindly spirit by those with whom your practical work commenced, show a grateful remembrance of it by extending the right hand of fellowship immediately to every new-comer. Should they prove unworthy, it is time enough to withdraw it again, but give them some encouragement to start with. On the other hand, if you have little to be grateful for in this way, let the thought of the discomfort you experienced make you doubly eager to save others from it. I lay a good deal of stress on this commonplace incident, because it is one of those in which you can do so much to help each other, and in which I can do scarcely anything to help you. It may be that my sympathy with those going through the little ordeal of a first beginning is the more active because it occasionally happens that I know something of such circumstances as may have led them to take to this work. But be this as it may, however kindly disposed I may feel towards any stranger, you know that week after week may go by without much opportunity of my giving any evidence of it beyond the ordinary formal greeting. Whereas you are workers together, and may be of much service to each other. Another reason why I am careful to speak of this is that many of you may fail to overcome the shy awkwardness which some experience in speaking to a stranger, because they do not realize how thoroughly the effort is worth while. It is one of the little things apt to be left undone by the most good-natured simply from want of thought. Possibly there is a little tendency in a continuance of hospital life to produce the spirit which inquires, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Guard against it, please.

Now, in order to become the sort of nurse that I have described to you there are various essential qualifications in which you can do much towards training yourselves, and