

Training of Nurses in Wartime Britain

*Reprinted by courtesy of J. Elise Gordon, Editor of the
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Nursing education in Britain has been carried on under great difficulties during the war but, looking back over the past five years, the profession can feel proud that never once have circumstances compelled it to lower the flag.

The curriculum has been preserved intact; though the nurses might be evacuated and the students collected in smaller groups to be lectured by peripatetic Sister Tutors hurrying and dashing between the various evacuation units; though the examination candidates might frequently find themselves facing the examiners on the morning after a night spent in coping with incendiary and high explosive bombs; though the difficulties in the way of a continuous ordered three years' training might seem at times to be insurmountable, yet somehow, by the dogged persistence which characterises the nursing profession the world over, these difficulties were surmounted.

Today, out of Britain's training schools (many still functioning in scattered units) are coming more nurses than ever before, each armed with the coveted State Registered badge, and with something still more valuable, the knowledge that even in crises which may blow the roof off, or, in a split second, make a gaping hole in the floor beside a patient's bed, she, the nurse, can and will stand unperturbed, caring only for the safety of the sick man or woman in her charge.

Before the beginning of the war, plans had to be made to deal with the vast number of air raid and other casualties which were expected immediately. Britain was divided into regions, served by the Emergency Medical Service, and a regional administration was set up under the Ministry of Health. In many hospitals these plans did not radically affect the nurse in training, except in so far as some wards had to be closed in readiness to receive a certain proportion of the casualties. As a result of this, the teaching material was, for a time, cut down.

The hospitals in the Greater London area, however, were much more severely reorganised. Not only were wards kept empty (often permanently) as upper floors were considered unsafe in the "blitz," but a great part of the hospital's work was transferred to evacuation centres in the surrounding country. It was intended that the London Hospitals should act mainly as casualty clearing stations from which casualties should be transferred to safe areas.

A number of emergency wings of big London hospitals took over mental and other hospitals on the outskirts of the city. The patients from the hospitals taken over were, in turn, moved further into the country. The emergency wings were staffed by members of the Civil Nursing Reserve and nurses evacuated from the various voluntary and municipal hospitals of the city.

Mingling of staff between the "hostess" hospital and the "evacuee" units has depended in proportion upon the type of hospital chosen. Where the "hostess" is a tuberculosis sanatorium or mental hospital, automatic exchange of staff has naturally been impossible. Many matrons have made it possible for visiting nurses to see something of the specialised work carried on in their hospitals for the benefit of the nurses' education. The mingling of nurses from different hospitals, voluntary and municipal, has had its influence, too, on the final outlook of students; as has also the fact that so many have worked in several hospitals during their training years, and so have seen different methods in action.

Training carried on under the disturbed conditions of the "blitz," together with evacuation of nurses, has thrown heavy burdens on the administration, particularly the teaching staff. Another serious factor has been the growing shortage of Sister Tutors (in relation to the ever increasing number of students) and strenuous efforts are being made to meet this deficiency.