

OCCASIONAL NOTES OF THE QUARTER.

The Sussex County Asylum Appointment.

This Journal being the organ of the Association of Medical Officers of Asylums, the editors consider it their duty to consider any special question which may arise in reference to the filling of asylum appointments.

The recent election to the Superintendentship to the Sussex County Asylum has been brought specially before their notice, first through letters to the weekly medical press, secondly through a numerously signed protest from assistant medical officers to asylums, and lastly through the meeting of the Association called to consider the subject of the appointment.

We feel that, whatever our own ideas may be, we must, in our editorial capacity, endeavour to give expression to the sentiments of the Association as enunciated at the special meeting referred to. In following this course we shall avoid noticing certain collateral points which, being now parts of history, cannot be altered by our comments.

It is but natural that many assistant medical officers should be disappointed and indignant with what has occurred. The grounds of their discontent are twofold. First they consider that the qualifications demanded were of an exclusive character, and higher than those usually required; and secondly, that the selection of a gentleman who had never had any residential experience of asylums was unjust to them.

First, then, as to the qualifications, it must be admitted that they were quite exceptional in their very exclusiveness. It is true that they were part of the rules of the asylum as passed by the Secretary of State for the Home Department in 1870, but it is well known that the Secretary of State only acts in a magisterial capacity in signing the rules of asylums, and the medical and other officers have really the fixing of the standard.

It seems to us a pity that the double qualification of a British University and the College of Physicians should be required from applicants for such appointments. We believe that the mesh should be very wide, so that the appointment should be open to all who, in addition to possessing practical

knowledge of lunacy matters, are properly qualified to practise their profession. No good can be gained by excluding the great majority of men who have devoted their lives to the special branch of their profession.

In old days there were greater distinctions between the superintendent and the assistant medical officer, who was in many cases called the apothecary. Nowadays each requires the same training, and each should be able to take the work of the other. If other English asylums had required similar qualifications some of the very best men in the speciality would have been excluded. We are not aware of any other county asylum in which the same qualifications as those in force at the Sussex asylum are required.

The second ground for dissatisfaction was that a gentleman had been appointed whose training had not been that of an assistant medical officer to an asylum.

We would not desire to have a law which makes it impossible under exceptional circumstances to appoint an exceptional man, but we hold that a preference should be given to men with asylum experience, and we sympathize with those who consider that they have been passed over unjustly, and that they have been treated as if their training in asylum management was of no value when compared with local and other interests.

It seems scarcely consistent of those who object to Committees of Visitors giving the preference to candidates who have served in asylums, on the ground that good outside men might thereby be excluded, to defend an exclusively framed standard of qualifications which must necessarily put out of court a large number of legally qualified men experienced in lunacy.

Surely no one who has any practical knowledge of the duties of a superintendent can deny that these duties will be done better by a man with experience than by one without such practical knowledge. The most assiduous out-door student when he comes to live for the first time in an asylum is struck by the difference between theoretical and practical knowledge of the insane, and the superintendent without such practical experience is to be pitied (as well as his patients). The speciality seems, indeed, bound to have difficulties thrown in its way. It has taken some time and much labour to get assistant medical officers to devote their time and attention to the higher branches of their profession, and when this is done they are not rewarded but

ignored, and, moreover, even those to whom they have looked for encouragement have told them, in effect, that those who have had no training are as good as they.

We refrain from referring to any other details of this election, but feel that the sympathy of the Association is due to assistant medical officers who, having done their duty and merited reward, have been passed over partly because of a rule which might have been altered and the alteration sanctioned before the election, and partly because of certain causes which are alleged to have weighed unduly against them. (See "Notes and News.")

Judicial Eccentricities.

A case occurred lately in the Law Courts which illustrates the great uncertainty of judicial proceedings. Judges are fond of asserting that their proceedings are only in accordance with the requirements of the law, yet they differ to an important extent in the course they pursue in reference to prisoners charged with crime and suspected to be insane. A labourer, named Taylor, was indicted before Mr. Justice Day at the Leeds Assizes for the murders of Annie Taylor and Thomas Berkill (Superintendent of Police), at Otley, in November last. A jury was impanelled for the purpose of ascertaining whether the prisoner was fit to plead or not. Medical men, including Dr. Clifford Allbutt, gave evidence as to the extraordinary delusions under which the prisoner laboured. He believed that he was sent into the world with four endowments, "health, strength, knowledge, and prosperity." Another delusion was that he had a little man in him, and that he had a dual nature. He asserted that the Almighty had impelled him to commit the above acts. On another occasion he said he could not have killed his daughter and Berkill, as God had said "Thou shalt not kill." At other times he seemed to forget entirely the death of his daughter, but had some recollection of the death of Berkill.

It is by no means unusual for a judge to desire to have the opinion of a medical witness as to whether the prisoner is of sufficiently sound mind to be able to plead. Mr. Justice Day, however, would not allow the medical men to give their opinion as to the prisoner's sanity. On the contrary, he said that to do so would be, in his opinion, to usurp the