

## M I S C E L L A N E O U S

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### THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF A MODERN HOSPITAL

*Chaux-de-Fonds, a Swiss town, last year opened a new hospital which, for both its design to suit medical requirements and its rational operation, may be considered exemplary. The hospital director, Mr. René Droël, has published a short monograph entitled "Réflexions sur quelques aspects particuliers de l'exploitation d'un hôpital". We think our readers will be interested in the extracts we give below, in view of the acknowledged and increasing importance which modern developments confer on hospital facilities and the resulting problems of construction, distribution and staff recruiting.*

As we have seen, any private business or public service may draw up forecasts to which it adapts its manpower, working hours, stocks, delivery schedules, and arrangements with clients. The situation is quite different for a hospital which assumes responsibilities extending over a vaguely defined region and which it must be able to discharge immediately at any time. To aggravate its difficulties, it suffers the consequences of nursing personnel shortage.

A hospital, whether it be district or regional, cannot refuse a patient admission, no matter where he comes from, on the grounds of its by-laws. It may be said of our own hospital that it is in a particularly difficult position and the distance separating our area from university hospital circles increases its importance and responsibilities which go far beyond the scope of a district hospital.

The hospital must always be able to discharge these responsibilities. Yet unpredictable circumstances, occurring simultaneously or at different times, may cause considerable variation in tasks, such as those arising from a series of serious accidents, epidemics, increased incidence of ailments due to changes in the weather, numerous serious cases requiring assiduous attention and constant

supervision. Medical and nursing personnel strength must therefore be maintained in order to cope with any sudden extra demand. In hospital wards, there is constant variation in the inmate population, but the nursing staff strength cannot be changed, for no one can forecast what tomorrow may bring. With patients to wash and prepare for examination of various kinds, pre and post-operation care, doctors' rounds, meals, etc., one characteristic of the working day for such staff is the alternating periods of intense activity and respite. In the operating theatre the working schedule inevitably varies according to the number and gravity of cases. As anaesthetics cannot be administered to and operations performed on patients unless they have fasted, these activities take place mainly from breakfast time to beyond midday, but a full team, comprising a surgeon, an anaesthetist, nurses and nursing aides must be constantly ready to cope with any eventuality. The over-all staff strength must be adequate to ensure that efficiency in every department is not jeopardized in the event of absences on sick-leave or vacation. It can therefore well be imagined that at certain times of the day, particularly during slack periods, nursing staff may have little or nothing to do but wait.

There are also other circumstances which make the task no easier for those in charge. Private clinics do provide a service which takes some of the load off the hospital, but due to recruiting difficulties, these institutions close during the holiday season. In addition many families with a member receiving treatment at home find it convenient to send the patient to hospital during their absence on vacation. Consequently, just when the hospital could do with a slack period to enable some of its staff to go on holiday, it must admit patients because other people wish to take a holiday.

All these obligations together must be considered in the particular context of the nursing personnel shortage. Recruiting nurses of any nationality is a struggle against heavy odds, for the shortage is general throughout the country.

Consequently, whilst the maximum must be obtained from the nursing personnel to run the hospital efficiently—which demands of them a knowledge of the premises, the equipment and the methods, as well as adaptability to environment—valuable time is lost due to the continual turnover of personnel.

## MISCELLANEOUS

Any effort to explain the difficulties connected with the organization of hospital activities and the recruiting of hospital personnel without attempting to find a solution would be pointless. Let us consider whether the situation is becoming easier or worse.

News from other hospitals, in Switzerland and abroad, does not encourage optimism. Developments in medicine, which must keep abreast of scientific progress, problems of hygiene and sterilization, and the centralization of costly equipment for diagnosis and therapy in modern hospitals all require qualified nursing and technical personnel in greater number. Concomitantly, further need for personnel is caused by social developments such as reduced working hours, longer holidays and leave for overtime.

Industrialists faced with similar problems seek solutions which dispense with human labour, such as industrial concentration, automation and plant modernization. In this connection we again come up against an aspect which is peculiar to the hospital; modernization requires more staff for it is first and foremost intended to promote the treatment and comfort of the patients rather than to facilitate the work of the hospital staff. This is a fact which cannot be overlooked, a fact which must be accepted even though it is to be hoped that human ingenuity will never produce an electronic nurse. How then can we overcome what is undoubtedly a serious problem of our time? It must not be forgotten that even modern hospitals, in Switzerland and elsewhere, do not fill all beds, because they are short of staff. We ask a great deal of nurses; their training begins at an age when, in many trades, they would obtain a recognized qualification. In addition, working hours in hospitals do not help recruiting, and even though pay is being improved it is well behind what could be earned in other activities requiring equal qualifications and involving equal responsibility.

Some people argue that these conditions are not taken into account in what is, first and foremost, a vocation. They hold the view that nursing care should be lavished in the traditional spirit of selflessness which is the rule for those who follow a religious calling. But is there anyone who does not feel the urge to help his neighbour? It is always easier to solve the problem by a lapidary phrase when one applies it to someone else's case. For, after all, whether we be in a position of authority or subordination, whether

we be endowed with intellectual or manual attributes, we are all at a hub of relationships and activities within society, but that is no reason to consider that we should ignore our rightful personal interest in order to do our duty with fitting dedication.

In any case, we have no choice. The risk of being unable to care for the sick properly is not a vague threat looming on the horizon: the danger is upon us, affecting almost every hospital. We must, therefore, in our opinion, face the situation by making the effort it demands and improving considerably the earnings of nursing personnel. The crisis will not be averted by this alone, as needs are enormous, but it will be attenuated if reinforcements can be led to the profession and, more especially, induced to stay.

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## THE POPULATION EXPLOSION

*The March-April 1967 issue of the Food and Agriculture Organization's magazine Freedom from Hunger<sup>1</sup> contains a leading article entitled "Warnings on Rising Population". It is well known that this is a problem of concern to a wide variety of circles in many countries and one which the Red Cross cannot ignore. In May 1966, we published in this connection an article on the action undertaken by the Red Cross of West Pakistan in the "Family planning" field.*

*By way of information, we give below the opinions of two senior officials which were published in the FAO magazine.*

United Nations Secretary-General U Thant and FAO Director-General B. R. Sen on separate occasions recently have issued calls for action to counter the alarming increase, both actual and potential, in the world population.

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<sup>1</sup> Rome, March-April 1967.