

IN THE RED CROSS WORLD

NURSES AND THE GENEVA CONVENTIONS

The XIIIth Quadrennial Congress of the International Council of Nurses which was held from June 16 to 24 at Frankfurt-am-Main voted, unanimously and by acclamation, the following text to be included in the "International Code of Nursing Ethics": "It is important that all nurses be aware of the principles of the Red Cross and the privileges as well as the obligations of nurses under the terms of the Geneva Conventions of 1949". Miss Anny Pfirter, head of the medical personnel section, representing the International Committee of the Red Cross, guardian of the Red Cross principles and promoter of the Geneva Conventions, was given an ovation on that occasion by the participants.

The International Council of Nurses' membership is drawn from more than fifty countries. The meeting in Frankfurt was attended by some five thousand nurses, to whose work the *International Review* will have occasion to return.

Belgium

On several occasions the International Review has mentioned the activities of some National Societies for the benefit of hospital patients. In May 1946 it published an article by the British Red Cross concerning the special service which it had set up and which under the title "Picture Library Scheme" is designed to offer patients distraction through art. It acquaints them of works of art, reproductions of pictures by great painters and these pictures are exchanged for others at regular intervals.

Our Review had also mentioned that a number of National Societies had organized hospital libraries¹. These services are now

¹ See *International Review*, August 1961.

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considered by the authorities concerned as an essential part of hospital equipment, for it has been observed that reading helps cure.

The Belgian Red Cross is active in this particular field and we are pleased to pay it a tribute by reproducing an article which appeared in the review Mieux-Vivre (Brussels, winter 1964-65) edited by the Belgian Red Cross.

Hospital libraries

Among the many activities of the Belgian Red Cross there is a service which has existed since 1936 and of which the aim is to provide libraries in the hospitals and sanatoria throughout the country and to promote the idea of libraries for the sick. This service, known as the National Hospital Library Council (CNBH), is simultaneously a library, a book distribution service and a social assistance movement.

The librarian in uniform or regulation overall is known to the patients simply as "Madame Croix-Rouge" or "Madame Bibliothèque".

On the same day of every week the librarian visits the wards and sick rooms with a "consolation trolley" as Georges Duhamel called it, "an ingenious device loaded with honest spiritual balm and remedies", loaded, in other words, with neat attractive well bound books. The patients look eagerly to the person who applies all the resources of psychology in order to satisfy them without coming into conflict with their opinions nor displaying any disapproval of their choice.

Complete cure does not depend solely on medicine and surgery but also on the patient's morale. The patient's thoughts must be diverted from illness to avoid resignation. His or her mind must also be taken off worries for kith and kin. A friendly reception on admission and a sympathetic atmosphere may attenuate grief and even cause it to be forgotten. It is the rôle of the librarian to participate in the creation of this favourable hospitable atmosphere of calm and thus in the cure.

Whenever the librarian is at a bedside, the patient knows that he is not just another "case". She will not talk of temperature,

sickness or treatment. With her, he is his natural self and through her he has contact with life outside. Some doctors have said that the Red Cross workers bring "a breath of fresh air" into the hospital. Their conversation guides the patient's thought into channels unconnected with the worries caused by hospitalization and the anxiety of being ill. This state of mind is maintained through the reading matter left with the patient.

Let us consider how the CNBH operates.

Its work requires a great deal of flexibility in human relations and strict observance of library rules. This flexibility is essential in view of the variety of institutions visited by the CNBH and the different categories of patients of varying intellectual levels that the librarians meet. They must be adaptable to circumstances, admit and understand the spirit prevailing in the various hospitals.

On the other hand, to maintain uniformity within the movement, the same methods are adopted and strictly applied in all the libraries, i.e. classification, catalogues, card-indexes, etc. In the library of the Ostend hospital, in that of the Brussels military hospital, in the institute for the mentally sick at Tournai, in a Verviers sanatorium; the filing of books is always the same, there are the same records of books out on loan, the same catalogue cards, the same binding in specific colours.

These regulations, this methodical and uniform organization, are attributes of the Secretariat, the genuine hub of the movement: "The Centre" for all concerned. Here professional librarians, graduated from specialized schools, guide and stimulate initiative, keep a watchful eye on the uniformity of work throughout the country and on the strict observance of the principles of library operation; important bibliographical documents are assembled together with the two central lending library collections, one for sanatoria, one for hospitals, each of which renews and keeps up-to-date the branch libraries in the different establishments. These central libraries also respond to the demand for books in various languages (Polish, Greek, Italian, Ukrainian, Turkish, Hungarian, etc.) and also satisfy individual requests ranging from such widely varying subjects as canary breeding to Plato.

All books are bound, they are neat and clean. This is a by no means negligible aspect of education, for greater care will be taken of

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a book if it is well presented. This is a task for the binding workshop of the CNBH. In compiling a library for use in a hospital there are a number of factors to be taken into consideration, such as the sex and age of the patients, the average intellectual standard, the knowledge of languages, length of hospitalization . . .

. . . The CNBH has learned from experience what harm can be caused to patients by apparently inoffensive books. For this reason it has set up reading committees.

At the present time when a library is being compiled, books are admitted only when they have been read and appraised by reading committees, which never lose sight of the fact that the books are intended for the sick, that is to say for people whose existence may be centred around their illness, who may be depressed, feverish, and therefore more sensitive and impressionable than would normally be the case.

These reading committees, both French and Flemish, comprise some forty women readers who have distributed or still distribute books and are therefore familiar with the reactions of sick people. Each book is read by two members of these committees who then exchange opinions when in session. Conclusions are noted on a summary-assessment card which gives in a few sentences a description and an opinion of the book, any requisite reservations of a medical character, and the type of readers which the book would particularly suit.

The CNBH has a card-index covering some 17,000 summary-assessments, in French and Flemish, constituting an essential and irreplaceable reference.

The seriously handicapped, the weak and the paralysed have not been forgotten by the CNBH. The Centre makes available for them special appliances such as prismatic spectacles for the bed-ridden which enable the book to be read without strain while it lies on the reader's chest ; page-turning appliances which enable the pages to be turned when the patient's arms are immobilized simply by pressure of the elbow or the chin ; as well as a " bibloscope " which projects microfilmed books onto a screen.

Record-players with records are also made available to patients wishing to study languages.

A few statistics will complete the picture : 1937—first hospital

library at the Saint-Pierre University hospital in Brussels. 1964—84
libraries in operation in :

- 49 general hospitals
- 6 institutions for the aged
- 6 military hospitals
- 8 institutions for the mentally sick
- 15 sanatoria and preventoria
- 103,000 catalogued books in stock
- 470 voluntary workers
- 446,000 loans in 1963.

No technical treatises could explain the need for a library in a hospital—if that hospital is to be considered as operated on humanitarian lines—so well as the sentiment expressed by an old lady who had lost the use of her legs : “ When I have a good novel, I feel as if I were again up and about ”, or as expressed by a patient awaiting another operation : “ Trouble is changed to joy when books are available ”. Another patient, realizing the moral support he was given, has offered to join the ranks of the CNBH or to supply books to increase the library’s stock.

That is why the CNBH was set up, met with success, and continues to develop ; unceasingly endeavouring to assist the patients and the hospitals by accomplishing this work which is truly in keeping with the spirit of the Red Cross.

Sierra Leone

On April 11, 1965, the Joint Commission of the Empress Shôken Fund granted an allocation to the Red Cross of Sierra Leone of 10,000 Swiss francs, to be utilized, in accordance with the wish expressed by that National Society, for the purchase of a Land Rover.

We have pleasure in announcing that the Red Cross of Sierra Leone has now effected purchase of this vehicle, which will be used