

WOMEN IN THE MEDICAL PROFESSION

Lady Doctors in the Dominion

HALF a century ago there was but one woman practising medicine in Europe. Even when Dr. Garrett Anderson had wrested the right to qualify and practise from an unwilling university, it was considerably later that women were allowed to sit in the lecture rooms side by side with the men students. But even prejudice dies in time, and although it tries occasionally to lift its head, public opinion is decidedly on the side of the women.

In the Medical School of our own Otago University a thorough course of training is available, which is as complete as that provided in London or Edinburgh, and the standing of the graduate is equally good. The course is excellent as far as theory goes, and doctors are quite willing to take students under their *aegeis* in any hospital in the large Dominion centres for instruction. Indeed, most surgeons, when holding an operation in a public hospital have no objection to an audience of young medicals for demonstration purposes.

The education of medical men and women here is identical, and their status is equal. When the student has passed the medical preliminary examination, she enters a university college, at any one of which she may begin her six years' course of study. Later, she must enter the Medical School in Dunedin, studying in the same classes as the men, and on a similar footing.

It is a long, strenuous, and costly course, and without good health and plenty of enthusiasm it is impossible to succeed. It is estimated that at least £1000 will be required in these days to cover the cost of training, and this includes books and instruments, but no luxuries. Before the war it was often done on much less, but to-day it would be impossible.

The minimum course of training is six years, but if specialising is intended, extra time is required, and European experience is necessary. There only are famous teachers and surgeons available, as well as the quantity of needful material. In Edinburgh, what is called the dispensary system is in use, and it is essential to the acquirement of valuable practical experience. Under it the young medical diagnoses and prescribes for the sick poor, and has to take all responsibility, but she can always refer in doubtful cases to her superior.

Students specialising may take posts during the holidays in mental hospitals, but not in term time; hence it is plain that it would require very careful management to make £1000 cover all the expenses of a protracted course of training.

Having graduated and registered, some women take up general practice, which for them becomes more or less confined to the diseases of women and children.

There is no doubt that women patients confide more freely in women doctors; they will mention details—often of the greatest



Gore, Dunedin, photo.

The Medical School of the Dominion, situated in King Street, opposite the Dunedin Hospital.

importance—to a woman rather than to a man, unless he happens to be very sympathetic. Children, too, are more at ease with a woman. They look on her as "mother's friend," but the man is "the doctor." In midwifery cases the woman doctor is preferred; but there is still much prejudice to be broken down in this direction.

In the Dominion there are women already specialising in midwifery, diseases of children, ophthalmology, tuberculosis, anaesthetics and surgery.

USUALLY the newly-qualified medical woman endeavours to get a resident post in one of the public hospitals. Timaru, Dunedin, Invercargill and a few other places have at length appointed women as house surgeons. Auckland and Wellington are less liberal in this respect, and it is to be hoped that every public hospital in the Dominion will before long consider the merits of men and women applicants for such positions solely on their merits. These resident posts are of great value in supplying facilities for obtaining a grasp of clinical work, and of undertaking its duties and responsibilities.

It is of interest in this connection to know that the present Medical Superintendent of the Auckland Mental Hospital was the first in the Dominion to engage a medical woman on his staff, and has already had three New Zealand graduates in that capacity.

School medical posts absorb a number of our medical women. The remuneration is at the rate of about £600 per annum. Medical Missions attract a few also. In organising and running child welfare centres a large field of work awaits women doctors, while in our public hospitals a further advance would be their appointment to honorary posts in medicine, surgery and children's diseases. Already a number are serving as honorary anaesthetists, and this is generally supposed to be the first step towards the honorary posts in medicine and surgery.

IN Great Britain, especially in Bradford and Durham, splendid work is being done by women in the infant welfare branch of public health. In those towns the doctors attend the consulting rooms, and see all the babies that come through. Just before the war, Dr. Balsille, in charge of the infants' welfare centre at Stoke-on-Trent, and Dr. Catherine McNeill in that of Leeds, were doing work of infinite value to the nation. Since then other centres have been established in most English towns under municipal direction.

In the Dominion, public health posts are at present held by men, but doubtless they will be opened to women as the country becomes more closely populated. These public posts are popular, on account of the definite hours of work, and though it is hard while it lasts, the evenings are free.

As a profession for women, medicine is only moderately popular. The course of training is long and costly, the work is hard, and makes great demands on the health. There is no social life at all, hours are irregular, and there is scant leisure for recreation.

IT must be remembered that the woman doctor is still a pioneer. She is still engaged in vanquishing prejudice, and her future success depends on the thoroughness which she puts into her work now, as well as the dignity with which she upholds this most honourable profession.

In a young country like New Zealand, where situation and climate combine to offer an environment conducive to the development of a healthy, well-balanced and intelligent race, the medical profession must play an important rôle. It must take an active part in preventing disease as well as in curing it. Only within the last decade or so has this altruistic aspect received the widespread attention it deserves.

For it is surprising after all how little the average human being knows about the body's needs, and its complex and extraordinarily delicate machinery. Very few of us have as yet mastered even the simplest rules with regard to the proper use of food, sleep, exercise, and suitable clothing, and until we have done so there is no doubt that Nature will continue to exact her revenge in the shape of preventible disorders and diseases.

Already in the Home Science Department of Dunedin University this phase of woman's work is receiving attention, and in conjunction with medical women is doing excellent pioneer work by means of Health Talks to Girls, particularly to business girls. In this way much health missionary work is being done, and the ground prepared for a better understanding of woman's duty to herself and to the next generation.