

*To the Editor of the Asylum Journal.*

Sir,—It is impossible to read Dr. Huxley's Report upon the introduction of "special night watching," without feeling that he has scarcely given the system a fair trial; and I cannot help thinking that he has been somewhat hasty in characterizing as reckless, cruel, and harsh a system which has been found of signal service in many large county Asylums.

It is some four years since I had my attention directed to the advantages of special night watching, by the same Commissioner in Lunacy, Mr. Gaskell, whose recommendations at the Kent Asylum have been received with so much disfavour by Dr. Huxley. Before that period, the night watching in the Leicester County Asylum was performed by the attendants in rotation; and, subsequent to Mr. Gaskell's recommendations, some experiments of similar character to those made by Dr. Huxley, were instituted by me, to test their value, the results of which were not unlike those which he has so particularly detailed.

The novelty of the plan, and the difficulty of obtaining suitable persons for the duties of continuous night watching, made me view with apprehension so great a change in our internal arrangements; but some experience of the inefficiency of the old plan of night watching, which I derived in the latter part of 1853, clearly shewed the necessity of greater attention being paid at night to the wants of those afflicted with paralysis; so that I came to the conclusion that it would be better to give to one person the charge by night of those incapable persons designated in Asylum nomenclature "wet and dirty" cases, rather than let that important duty be divided amongst 12 or 14 persons, who, by the long interruption of their night duties, could only have very imperfect acquaintance with these afflicted cases.

We have now at the Leicester County Asylum, a special night attendant, who enters upon his duty at ten o'clock at night, and gives up his charge at six o'clock in the morning. This attendant has special charge over the wet and dirty cases, and while he expects to receive these patients in a cleanly state on his entrance upon his duties, it is expected of him that he shall deliver them up to the day attendants in similar condition; and that condition is regularly recorded in the ward Reports.

This system of night attendance has been in operation with us nearly three years, and I have found it a valuable means, not only of enforcing cleanliness and order, where previously only dirt and neglect had prevailed, but also of great moral effect in the governance of the Asylum. I confess I was somewhat startled at hearing this system of special night watching, characterised as a reckless project by a gentleman of Dr. Huxley's experience. In order to ascertain the difficulties which beset the system, especially as regards the time occupied in attending to the wants of the wet

and dirty cases, and also as regards the disturbing effects on other patients, I accompanied the night attendant last night on his first round (which I did without giving him previous notice), and found that he had twenty-five patients of the class who were the objects of his peculiar attention. In two cases the sheets were found wet, by soakage of urine, and they were, of course, replaced by clean ones, in fifteen cases the patients got up and performed the act of micturition; six of them owing to the great amount of paralysis, with which they were afflicted, were assisted in and out of bed, by the attendant; twenty-three of the patients so visited, were in single rooms, two only were placed in associated bed-rooms. The whole period of getting out these twenty-five patients, and performing those acts necessary to leave them in a state of comfort and cleanliness occupied *forty-six minutes*, and by the simple contrivance of list-slippers, and a little India rubber round the frames of the passage-doors, these visits were so noiselessly made, that not half-a-dozen patients, besides those specially visited, were at all disturbed.

Upon re-visiting those patients who had been subjected to what Dr. Huxley terms the "turning-out system," I was gratified to find that the "disturbing influences," to which they had recently been subjected, were at all events of a very fleeting character, and I am clearly of opinion, that all these and similar cases, are better off with their rest so disturbed four times every night, *with cleanliness*, than if they had been permitted to have "sound sleep and plenty of it," with *wet and dirty sheets next their skins*.

Moreover it will be found that enforced cleanliness by night, leads to habits of cleanliness by day, for the ordinary day attendants knowing that they must give up their patients at night in a cleanly state, do not find it any particular advantage to hurry their patients off to bed at improperly early hours. In the patients themselves, that irritability which long neglect of personal cleanliness engenders diminishes, and with it diminishes the necessity for those early hours of retiring to rest, which seem habitual to Dr. Huxley's patients; at all events to those six who were the subjects of his personal investigation, four of whom were found wet or dirty, so early as seven p.m.

"In conclusion, while I agree with you, that the subject of special night-watching is too important not to invite free discussion, I may remark that any observation respecting the internal economy, and management of Asylums, should be received with great respect, when falling from so experienced and successful a cultivator of the science of mental medicine, as Mr. Gaskell, whose accession to the Commission of Lunacy, ought to be a source of gratification to all professional men.

JOHN BUCK.

*Leicester County Asylum,  
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