

Mental Defectives Under the Poor Law*: How the Problem is Dealt with at Ipswich by Co-operation with other Bodies.

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THE proper care of the mentally deficient who become chargeable to the rates is one of the most difficult problems with which Guardians are faced.

In the old days very little was done for them. The imbeciles, if not too troublesome, were left in the ordinary Workhouse or Infirmary Wards where they were often a great source of annoyance to the old people and where they sometimes met with a good deal of unkindness from the rougher inmates. The higher grade feeble minded girls, too weak to succeed in the battle of life, were allowed to drift into the Workhouse and to mix with the very worst women there; and as a result they often left the Workhouse to lead an immoral life, returning again and again to give birth to illegitimate, weak minded children.

When the Act of 1913 was passed, it was hoped that the Guardians would, in a great measure, be relieved of the care of the mentally deficient; but owing to the need of economy due to post war conditions, and the consequent shortage of Special Institutions, a great many defectives still remain under the direct care of the Guardians; and it is obvious that for a considerable period Workhouses will have to be used as places of detention under the Act. This state of affairs is much to be regretted, as even under the most favourable circumstances Workhouses are not the right places for the majority of mental defectives. Conditions which are suitable for the aged and infirm, whose physical and mental powers are on the wane and who chiefly require peace and comfort, may be deadening to mental defectives who need the stimulus of constant change and interesting occupation. The Nurses in the ordinary Poor Law Infirmary have neither the time nor training to teach the lower grade mentally deficient how to develop such powers of mind as they have, and therefore the defectives tend to grow dull and apathetic. The high grade feeble minded girls realise that the other inmates are able to take their discharge at will and they bitterly resent the fact that they themselves are detained. As a result they are much more troublesome than they would be in an Institution where all the inmates were certified. The discipline and peace of the Workhouse in consequence suffers, and the Officials are inclined to blame the defectives and to forget the fact that the defectives are deprived of their freedom through their mental infirmity and through no fault of their own, and therefore it is the duty of the State to make their lives in the Institution as happy as possible. In a few Workhouses the mental defectives have special classes and are taught

* For a lucid account of the legal position, see "The Poor Law Officers' Journal," Feb. 2nd, 9th and 16th, 1928.—ED.

various handicrafts, but, although such a course has proved to be very beneficial, most Boards of Guardians are reluctant to incur the expense of having a whole-time trained teacher, and it is almost impossible to obtain a lady with the required qualifications who is able and willing to be a part time worker.

The Ipswich Board of Guardians have surmounted this difficulty by co-operation with the Voluntary Association of Mental Welfare. Each pays half the salary of a trained teacher who works under the Voluntary Association in the Occupation Centre for imbecile children in the mornings, and who takes the mentally deficient in the Workhouse for two hours every afternoon. She gives two afternoons a week to the cases in the Women's Infirmary, two afternoons to the women in the body of the House and one afternoon to the mentally deficient male patients.

The defectives in the Infirmary are of so low a mentality that it is difficult to teach them much in the few hours at the teacher's disposal, and most of the time of the class is occupied in recreation; music, dancing and singing. The defectives in the body of the House spend part of their two hours in recreation, but they devote the rest of the time to learning raffia work, mat making, basket work, leather work, embroidery, knitting, crochet, etc., etc., During their spare time in the week they finish the work which they began at the Class and they turn out very pretty, saleable articles. These are sold at a special Stall at the Brabazon Sales, and the proceeds of the sale more than cover the cost of the material.

The defectives go for a weekly walk outside the Workhouse grounds; at Christmas each is given a present and in summer those, who are well enough, are taken for an outing into the country or to the seaside.

The Classes have brought a great deal of interest and pleasure into the lives of the defectives; the teacher usually gives them work to do which appeals to their sense of beauty and they are very proud of the articles they make.

In the future it might be possible to extend a good deal further on these lines. A whole time teacher could be beneficially employed, and it would be advantageous if the defectives could have special wards and attendants. Undoubtedly, however, the ideal is that all defectives needing institutional care, excepting only the most infirm, should be removed from Workhouses and placed in special Institutions for the Mentally Deficient.

Besides sharing with the Voluntary Association the services of the teacher for the defectives, the Ipswich Board of Guardians co-operates in various other ways with that Association and also with the Statutory Committee and with the Education Committee; and this co-operation facilitates the work of all the bodies concerned.

The Workhouse Officials report to the Secretary of the Voluntary Association any inmate who appears to them to be certifiable. The Secretary interviews the alleged defective, makes enquiries into his or her history from relatives, and past employers and teachers, and submits the report to the Workhouse Committee, who are then in a position to decide whether or not to refer the case to their Medical Officer for examination. It is a distinct advantage to the rate-payers for all mentally deficient persons to be transferred to the Statutory Committee as then half the cost of their maintenance can be recovered from Treasury funds.

Moreover, in adopting such cases for certification, the Statutory Committee can remove the defective from the Workhouse to some more suitable place: such a course is desirable when dealing with young people who are likely to benefit by the training which they would receive in a special Institution for the Mentally Defective.

If the Secretary of the Voluntary Association knows that any person, whom she believes to be mentally defective, has entered the Workhouse, she reports the matter to the Guardians' Officials, who are usually able to persuade the alleged defective to remain in the Workhouse until the necessary enquiries and arrangements have been made. If the inmate in question is found to be a settlement case, who has to be removed to another Union, the Secretary of the Voluntary Association is informed as soon as the transfer has taken place in order that she may notify the case to the Voluntary Association of the District to which the alleged defective has been taken. This procedure is advisable as it may prevent some very defective persons from discharging themselves from the Workhouse almost immediately upon their admission and subsequently getting into serious trouble.

Regulation 238 of the Act states that the Superintendent of a Certified Institution with the consent of a Commissioner or two of the Members of the Committee may grant leave of absence to any patient detained in the Institution. When the Regulations were made, it was probably assumed that the Superintendent of a Certified Institution would be a Medical man or a person with special knowledge of mental deficiency and that the Members of the Committee would be persons selected because of their interest in the welfare of defectives. At the present time many Workhouses have been certified for the reception of defectives under the Act; the Master of a Workhouse and the Members of the Committee may be persons whose knowledge of mental deficiency is limited; yet according to the Regulations, the Master of a Workhouse and any two of the Workhouse Committee are empowered to give leave of absence for an indefinite period to a patient without consultation with the Statutory Committee, although that Committee, having had the whole facts of the case placed before them and having obtained the opinion of two qualified medical men, have deemed it necessary for the defective to be detained in an Institution. The difficulties that may arise through this Regulation must be apparent to everyone; and they are the more likely to occur because many defectives improve greatly both in conduct and appearance whilst under Institution care, but go back mentally and physically if they leave. People, who have not witnessed this deterioration and who are not conversant with the appalling difficulties into which defectives are apt to get when they are not under proper care, very naturally underestimate the dangers of allowing high grade defectives to leave an Institution. It therefore appears desirable that the Regulation should be so amended as to ensure that leave of absence exceeding 48 hours should only be granted to certified patients in Workhouses with the approval of the Medical Officer and with the concurrence of the Statutory Committee.

Since persons of low mentality are more likely than persons of average intellect to require indoor relief for themselves and their children, it is extremely probable that a considerable proportion of the children under the Guardians' care will prove to be dull and backward or feeble minded.

The Superintendent of the Ipswich Poor Law Children's Home calls the attention of the Secretary of the Voluntary Association to any child whose mentality appears to be subnormal in order that she may arrange for the child to be interviewed by the School Medical Officer for the purpose of classification of his or her mental condition. The records made by the Medical Officer not only serve as a guide to the Guardians in their present dealings with the children, but will be of great use if, in the future, the case of any of these subnormal children comes before the Statutory Committee for consideration, as it will obviate the difficulty, which is now often experienced, of proving that the defect existed from an early age.

Most School Doctors in the course of their work come across difficult cases of mentally unbalanced children in which it is hard to decide whether the abnormality is due to real mental defect or to unsatisfactory home surroundings. The Ipswich Guardians have admitted several such children into their Poor Law Home for observation at the request of the School Doctor although the parents of the children were not destitute in the ordinary meaning of the word.

This same useful co-operation is also shown by the Ipswich Guardians and the Statutory Committee with regard to defectives who are not in need of Institution care. If a defective, who is under Statutory Supervision, requires help owing to the temporary unemployment of his or her parents, the Guardians give assistance during the time of stress, and the defective comes again under Statutory supervision when the need for relief has passed; thus the necessity of placing the defective under permanent guardianship under the Act is obviated. On the other hand, if it appears that a defective, who is having out-relief, can be dealt with better by the Local Authority than by the Guardians, the Statutory Committee accept the case without making any difficulty.

The Guardians avail themselves of the help of the Voluntary Association in dealing with defective persons who are receiving out-relief; a list of the names of all such persons is given by the Relieving Officer to the Secretary of the Voluntary Association who visits the cases regularly and sends quarterly reports to the Out-Relief Committee, and any suggestion made by her for the welfare of any of the defectives is usually carried out.

Since many defective persons need at various times in their lives assistance from the Education Committee, the Board of Guardians, and the Statutory Committee, it is imperative that all these bodies should work harmoniously together in the carrying out of their duties. This is done with considerable success in Ipswich and is in no small measure due to the tact and efficiency of the successive Secretaries of the Ipswich Voluntary Association, who have in many ways acted as a link between the three public bodies.