

CORRESPONDENCE.

PRIVATE ASYLUMS.

To the Editors of the 'Journal of Mental Science.'

GENTLEMEN,—The defence of private asylums in the last number of the *Journal* is certainly convincing, for it shows that the percentage of recoveries in provincial licensed houses was higher last year than that in any other class of institutions for the insane. But, in addition to this, it may be pointed out that the true recovery rate in private asylums—*i.e.* the ratio of the number who get well to the number who die or become chronic—is higher than the apparent recovery rate estimated by the ratio of recoveries to admissions. The cause of this is that many patients are removed from licensed houses, for pecuniary or other reasons, without being given the chance of getting well. This is not the case to an appreciable extent in public asylums; about registered hospitals I am ignorant. The patients thus removed swell the number of admissions without being afforded an opportunity of adding to the number of recoveries. In public asylums practically all the patients admitted either recover on the one hand, or, on the other hand, die or become chronic; hence the percentage of recoveries may reasonably be expressed by the ratio of recoveries to admissions. But in licensed houses the existence of a large third class—those who are taken away for monetary or other motives—vitiates this method of computation. The larger this third class is, the more unfair does the use of the above ratio become.

The Commissioners in Lunacy have recognised that this method of estimating the recovery rate is unsatisfactory, but they have shown that there is no other practicable method that is not even more so. It would be well, however, if they would indicate that the use of the ratio of recoveries to admissions bears hardly upon licensed houses.

The unfairness is not so great as it might seem at first sight, for the patients who are thus removed rarely include the most acute and curable cases, so that the percentage of recoveries amongst them would not be high. Still, I have known acute cases removed when progressing rapidly towards convalescence, and even among the others some would get well. It is probable that some private asylums would have their recovery rate raised 4 or 5 *per cent.*, or possibly even more, if it were not for these cases.

It may be said that, on the other hand, public asylums labour under a disadvantage that affects their recovery rate, in that the poor do not send their insane friends till they are practically compelled to do so. But neither do the richer classes as a rule. Indeed, the case is even worse with these, for they take the patient to a consultant who too often has no experience of asylum treatment, and who pronounces him to be insane but not bad enough for an asylum. In the same manner one might tell a man with a broken leg that he has a fracture but is not bad enough to wear splints. I use this simile advisedly. The action of asylum life on an unbalanced mind appears to me to be analogous to that of a splint on a fractured limb. Quite as important as the healthy life, the skilled care, and the isolation from home surroundings is the routine existence which keeps the unsteady mind in artificial grooves, so to speak, and thus furthers powerfully the return of steadiness. In addition to this there is the strong "suggestive" action due to being surrounded by others who all lead the same routine life. These most important factors of cure cannot be found in "private care." There are other advantages of asylums, but they were clearly proclaimed some years ago by Prof. Clifford Allbutt, who spoke with authority, being one who for a time gave up to lunacy what was meant for the benefit of medicine as a whole.

I am, Gentlemen,

Yours faithfully,
P. C. SMITH.

Tunbridge Wells,
October 30th, 1906.