

ternal ventilation of all the water closet drains has now been completed, and there is at present no case of diarrhoea."

These extracts clearly show that in the county asylums of Hereford, Wadsworth, South Riding and Wadsley, slow poisoning by sewage gas was going on. We have, therefore, now to deal with only four asylums, viz.:—Bucks, Cornwall, Hanwell and Sussex. In these instances it is impossible to arrive at any definite conclusion for want of sufficient data. Before it could be stated that typhoid, &c., appeared in these asylums from causes other than sewer-contamination, it would be necessary to have clear and conclusive proof that the latter was impossible.

Now to sum up the whole matter. In every asylum about which we possess definite information, in which erysipelas, diarrhoea, or typhoid fever has occurred, we have a distinct history of poisoning by sewer gas. The extracts from official reports prove that there is no foundation in fact for Dr. Phillimore's statement, "that erysipelas has been a fatal and troublesome epidemic in some well-constructed modern asylums." Surely Dr. Phillimore is not ignorant of the very faulty arrangements in some modern asylums for the prevention of poisonous gases finding their way from the drains into the buildings. In some cases things were in such a bad state that it was necessary to remove all the original appliances, and in others their improvement is now being effected. That these statements are true can be shown from official reports, and are besides notorious.

I am quite at a loss to discover any rational motive that Dr. Phillimore could have in publishing the paragraph to which I have drawn attention. Because he does not choose to make post-mortem examinations, why should he try to prevent others from making them? If he could prove his proposition, no more would be made in asylums, unless the medical officers had a desire to answer a charge of manslaughter or murder.

This is the only communication with which I shall trouble you on this subject.

I am, &c.,
T. McDOWALL.

[Copy of letter in "British Medical Journal," 22nd December, 1877.]

POST-MORTEM EXAMINATIONS IN LUNATIC ASYLUMS.

SIR,—The right to perform post-mortem examinations is occupying the attention of the public, the Poor Law staff, and the superintendents of lunatic asylums. I was engaged upon the uncongenial task of making enquiries as to what is the practice in kindred institutions when the public judgment so strongly expressed by Lord Salisbury opportunely came to strengthen the position, justifying my scruples, and further to demonstrate the sensitiveness of the nation upon the subject.

The daily press and the medical are all agreed that unauthorised and indiscriminate necropsies, whether in public or private practice, are not desirable, and that it is entirely at variance with the law to act in the absence of explicit and formal instructions. The editor of the "Journal of Mental Science," in a late number (94), says that "the subject of compulsory post-mortem examinations is a very difficult one, not to say dangerous." He probably referred only to the rights of the deceased or of the relatives; but there is also a professional aspect to the question. I object, as a medical man, to being compelled to pursue one branch of scientific knowledge whilst engaged in another more suited to my taste and inclination. I prefer enquiring into the causes that produce insanity, and promoting the cure—to recording the mischief that has resulted from it. When the question was raised by the Commissioners in Lunacy in 1870, I determined to act with caution, not to assume an aggressive attitude, but confine myself strictly to the duties assigned to me by the law. Mr. Wickham, of the Newcastle Asylum, has clearly shown that, since the publica-

tion of the number of the necropsies performed, a spirit of rivalry has been encouraged, and favourable and unfavourable contrasts have been drawn, according to the zeal displayed in this cause. At that time, I consulted my solicitor, who informed me that I could give no answer to any charge brought against me in this respect by the relatives of a deceased lunatic, unless I could produce some consent or an order from a competent legal authority. Like Mr. Wickham, I applied for permission from the Coroner, and I received the same reply—that he had no power unless he held an inquest; and he added that a case might arise in which he could exercise the power of calling in somebody else. Indeed, in conference with one of the magistrates, the latter did not hesitate to say that, in the abstract, he was not quite sure whether a superintendent was the proper person to undertake such inquiries. The following brief account comprises the several methods of procedure adopted for the most part in English asylums:—

1. In some asylums, where post-mortem examinations are the rule, no consent of the relatives is sought or obtained, the superintendent claims the right of acting at his own discretion.

2. In several others, arrangements are made, whilst the patient is alive, for conducting his post-mortem examination. In that event, consent thereto is inferred, unless a notice in writing to the contrary be lodged with some official at the asylum.

3. In others, a notice is sent after the death to the relative that a post-mortem examination will be made or is necessary, and, unless an answer forbidding it be sent in the briefest possible period allowed, the instruction is carried out.

Mr. Wickham's experience is adverse to this, and he is not the only one who has been threatened with violent measures. Moreover, it confounds non-assent with consent.

4. In some lunatic asylums, expressed consent is obtained verbally; there can be no objection to this, provided there is no undue pressure.

5. My practice is to send the following addendum to the notice of death to the relative:—"If the relative or other person having due authority will send a written sanction for a post-mortem examination to be made, the superintendent will be willing to conduct the same, time permitting." In cases of peculiar interest, a personal interview, with a view to persuasion, is solicited.

It appears to me to be of doubtful propriety to force upon the poor what we should shrink from doing with the rich. Every Englishman has a right to be buried un mutilated and decently covered. The infliction of three thousand seven hundred and three post-mortem examinations in one year, that number dying in county asylums, is needless, and a waste of power. The system is calculated to excite suspicion of neglect during life, and of ignorance of the cause of death.

My remarks apply to asylums where the officers are salaried out of the public rates, and bound to uphold the law. In hospital and charitable institutions not under the magistracy, where the patient seeks charity, and the friends in turn ought to be charitable, the case is somewhat different. Mr. Wickham considers that an inquest ought to be held in every case. This would satisfy the ethical conditions of the question, but might not be acceptable to the ratepayers, on account of the expense.

In conclusion, I am satisfied that a post-mortem examination was never contemplated at all in any one of the Lunacy Acts as a function of the superintendent. Any other than a medical man may be appointed as such by the Visitors and Secretary of State; and nothing is more likely to damage the authority now enjoyed by the medical officer than a demand for special professional privileges.

I am, &c.,

WM. P. PHILLIMORE, M.B., Superintendent.
Nottingham County Asylum, December 10th, 1877.