Broken Ribs and the Press.

The "Evening Standard," of July 11, contained a short article which, in the interest of truth and justice, demands more than a passing notice at our hands.

No member of our specialty who is engaged in responsible public work has a right to complain when his public acts are made the subject of fair and enlightened criticism. But when this criticism appears in a newspaper of respectable position, and is neither fair nor enlightened, but both ignorant and illogical, it is desirable that it should be met by a clear and temperate statement of facts, in order that the public may be enabled to form a sound judgment between the two.

The article referred to was as follows:—

Whether it is that the ribs of lunatics are particularly brittle, or that those who come in contact with lunatics have a mania for breaking ribs, may be a matter of question; but it is certain that the number of lunatics who are killed by the breakage of their ribs is very large indeed. Of course the public only hear of cases in which an investigation takes place and coroners' juries return verdicts; but we may be sure that these are not one in ten—probably not one in a hundred—of the cases of this kind which actually occur. If a lunatic dies of broken ribs, it is the interest of all parties to hush the matter up. The keepers do not desire any awkward inquiries, and, indeed, dislike absolutely the view which juries are apt to take of these cases. Superintendents are content to receive the attendant's report of the circumstances of a death without much question, because the occurrence of these repeated instances of broken ribs casts a sort of slur upon an establishment. And so all goes on merrily; lunatics' ribs get broken somehow, or break by themselves; the fact of death is notified to friends, to whom the news comes as a relief; quiet funerals take place; and the asylum continues to stand high in public estimation. Still, in spite of the efforts of attendants, nurses, superintendents, and, indeed, of all connected with the asylums, these awkward deaths arising from the tendency of lunatics' ribs to break come to light, and pig-headed jurymen refuse to believe that the ribs snapped wholly and entirely to gratify their owner's desire to injure the institution of which he was an inmate. Such a case is that of an inmate of the County Asylum, Gloucester, seven of whose ribs were found broken after death. Of course the jury were unable to learn that any assault had been committed upon the lunatic, and yet they stolidly refused to credit the self-evident fact that the ribs had cracked from sheer perversity, and absolutely returned a verdict of

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wilful murder against some person or persons unknown. If all juries were as this jury, and all the cases of deaths in asylums were investigated, we wonder how many score of verdicts of wilful murder would be brought in in the course of each year.

It will at once be seen that a wholesale and an indiscriminate charge is here made both against the friends of patients, who, for selfish reasons, are relieved by the violent deaths of their insane relatives; against the superintendents of asylums, whose only object is to escape a slur upon their establishments; and against the attendants, in whom a reckless brutality is only limited by the fear of detection and legal consequences. It is moreover assumed as a proven fact that of the unfortunate patients who are done to death in asylums, only one here and there becomes the subject of a coroner's inquest, and has the cause of his death properly investigated.

These are bold, and, if warranted by facts, would be terrible, statements. Fortunately for the credit of the English asylum system, no less than for the peace of the British public, it is easy to demonstrate that such assertions are in no degree based upon fact, but are founded upon the operations of a fertile and sensation-loving imagination.

During the last five years the number of patients under care and treatment in English asylums has been upwards of 102,000. The deaths have amounted to upwards of 22,000, in more than 50 per cent. of which post-mortem examinations were made.

In this period the number of recorded deaths from fractured ribs in these establishments was 11, and in nine of these the fractures were discovered by post-mortem examinations conducted by the resident medical officers of the asylums.

Here are the bald facts. What are the fair inferences to be drawn from them?

Assuming that the superintendents of asylums, who are educated physicians, are as honest as, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, we have a right to assume them to be, and seeing, moreover, that, if they were not, they are constantly surrounded by critics who, from various causes, are certain, some of them, to be hostile, the number of post-mortem examinations may be fairly taken to represent, more than fully, the deaths which were not due to causes clearly ascertained at the time of death; in other words, deaths as to the causes of which a suspicion might exist.

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The deaths due to fractured ribs, or in which such injuries were discovered to have been present during life, have amounted to just one in every 2,000 deaths, or one in every 1,000 where post-mortem examinations were made, and in several of these the coroners' juries were satisfied, from the evidence which was presented to them, that the injuries were the result either of accident or of self-inflicted violence.

But how was the existence of these injuries brought to light? Why, by the action of the very men, the superintendents of asylums, whose interest it is said to be to hush such matters up. The special case referred to by the "Standard," which formed the basis of its article, seems to have owed its discovery entirely to the fact that a post-mortem examination was made by the medical officers, who, as in duty bound, at once communicated to the coroner, regardless of anything but the discovery of the truth, if discovery were possible.

Representing, as it is the aim of this Journal to represent, both the modern humanitarian treatment of insanity and the men who are practically concerned in its development, our duty in this instance consists, not in acting as a partisan of cruelty or an apologist for wrong-doing, but in endeavouring to do simple justice to a body of men who have been grossly maligned.

It is an act of common justice to state firstly that the friends of insane patients, as a rule, are as much attached to them, and as little likely to be thankful for their deaths, as any other class of persons in Her Majesty's dominions; secondly, that the superintendents of asylums have at no time pursued a "peace-at-any-price policy" in the conduct of their establishments, but have consistently striven to maintain within them a high standard of humanity, and to expose and punish those in their employ who have committed infractions of it, and that irrespective altogether of the question of reputation of their asylums, knowing quite well that no asylum could long maintain a high character in which truth and honour and justice were disregarded; and thirdly, that while among attendants there are, as in other classes, many black sheep, they will not as a body compare unfavourably with any persons of their own rank who have to discharge duties of a most onerous and delicate nature under circumstances which are frequently peculiarly repulsive and trying.

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