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PHILADELPHIA, NOVEMBER 6, 1926

The High Cost of Sickness

DR. C. C. BURLINGAME, in addressing a recent convention, made a striking and timely plea for the wider application of business methods to hospital operation and for the enforcement of those economies without which the high cost of sickness will never be reduced.

No other country had raised hospital construction to the high level it has attained in America. Our institutional buildings are characterized by beauty, cheerfulness, convenience, healthfulness and an extraordinary suitability, in gross and in detail, for the purpose for which they were erected. Highly skilled experts supervise the smallest minutiae of plan and equipment, and devise meritorious improvements almost daily. Able and enthusiastic men and women staff most of these institutions, and as a net result they serve certain groups with a perfection which fifteen or twenty years ago would have seemed incredible.

Extremes meet in the personnel of the group that gets the completest service, for among these happy patients are both the very rich and the very poor. The wealthy enjoy every diagnostic, medical, surgical and therapeutic advantage the institution can muster because they are able to pay for it whatever be its cost. The indigent command the skill of crack surgeons and specialists and receive very much the same sort of treatment for nothing, or next to nothing, because no hospital worthy of the name is content to give a patient anything less than its best.

A large percentage of hospital inmates lack these advantages, for it is they who are the great financial middle class, composed of self-respecting persons who are too proud to accept free service and too poor to be able to afford costly private rooms, highly paid surgeons and the expensive laboratory studies which have done so much to take the guesswork out of modern medicine and surgery. They flock to the cheapest rooms, employ the best professional service they can pay for, deny themselves all but the most essential attention, and finally leave the institution with depleted savings, after having received less for their money than the free patient got for nothing. In other words, they are penalized for their self-respect and for their determination to pay their own way.

Common observation goes to confirm the truth of the picture Doctor Burlingame has drawn; but conclusive

proof of its correctness is to be found in the earnest efforts of progressive boards of managers to better the conditions he has pointed out, and to bring all hospital facilities within the reach of persons of moderate means. The first step in this direction is wise employment of funds and entire elimination of waste. These imply the universal adoption of scientific accounting methods, accurate cost-keeping systems, standardization of supplies, conservation of material, skillful purchasing, and that eternal vigilance without which real economy never thrives.

Even the best-managed hospitals show an operating deficit. This must be wiped out by income from endowment, state or municipal aid, appropriations from local welfare organizations or private contributions. Well-managed hospitals should be regarded not as charities but as quasi-public utilities, and as such they should be able to command the loyal support of all who are within their sphere of service; for the more they can count on the public, the more the public can count on them.

The problem of cheaper hospital facilities is everywhere being agitated, and it can and will be solved as soon as the business men of the country and their powerful organizations attack it in force and apply to it methods similar to those which have brought efficiency and economy into their own successful enterprises. There is no field of humane endeavor in which business leaders can produce more beneficent results, if they will enter it in a big way and give their best thought to its peculiar needs.