

MISCELLANEOUS CITY NEWS

TORMENTING THE INSANE.

WHAT THE BOARD OF CONSULTING PHYSICIANS TO BLACKWELL'S ISLAND ASYLUM ARE DOING—ABUSES TO BE CORRECTED.

The three cases of alleged neglect and cruelty by the officers and attendants of the Lunatic Asylum for Females, at Blackwell's, were made the subject of a special inquisition on Wednesday afternoon by several members of the Board of Consulting Physicians, who proceeded to the island for that purpose, and spent several hours in examining witnesses. A brief description of these cases—that of Emma Morrison, who was delivered of an infant while confined in a camisole on the night of Oct. 11; that of Caroline Weil, alleged to have perished of starvation on Oct. 10, and that of a third patient, Amella Day, poisoned on the afternoon of Sept. 28, by arsenic carelessly left in the slop-pail by a nurse—has already appeared in these columns. The inquiry respecting these cases, as was intimated last week, was commenced at the instance of Commissioners Cox, Hess, Brennan, and Phillips, and in consequence of a communication from Secretary Phillips requesting a medical examination of certain specific statements in circulation. At the same time it is an error of fact to infer that the Board of Consulting Physicians was instituted for the purpose of examining and reporting upon these cases. So far is this from being true that the cases were not in existence when the Medical Board, consisting of Dr. J. R. Wood, Dr. Montrose A. Pallen, Dr. E. G. Janeway, Dr. Austin Flint, Jr., Prof. A. L. Loomis, Prof. Charles Inslee Pardee, Dr. T. P. P. White, Dr. Allan McLane Hamilton, and Dr. Whitman V. White, was appointed. The first is President, and the second Secretary of the commission; and, according to statements by Dr. Allan McLane Hamilton and others, the members composing it had already held several meetings, and collected a considerable volume of facts bearing upon asylum abuses, when the three specific cases sifted on Wednesday were referred to them. It would consequently be an unwarrantable perversion of facts to convey the impression that sufficient importance was given by the Commissioners to unauthenticated rumors to induce them to institute a special board of investigation. Quite the contrary, The Board of Consulting Physicians was appointed last June for the purpose of making a thorough and careful investigation of the affairs, system, and methods of treatment, dietetic and sanitary administration, and abuses, if such existed, of the several pauper asylums under the control of the Commissioners, and the special inquiry on Wednesday afternoon was merely incidental, digressive, and, as it turned out in the end, not very important.

The members of the board who were present at the examination on Wednesday were Dr. J. R. Wood, Dr. Montrose A. Pallen, President and Secretary; Dr. Allan McLane Hamilton, an expert of standing in diseases of the nervous system, and Dr. Whitman V. White. The first case inquired into was that of Emma Morrison. Dr. Strew, Superintendent of the asylum, testified that Miss Morrison was placed in the institution by her father, who gave a history to Assistant Physician Kingston, stating that she was unmarried and of good repute. Dr. Kingston tried to make an examination, but was prevented by the violence of the patient. The diagnosis was acute mania, and her condition did not improve after the birth of her baby. Patient was so extremely nervous and destructive that frequent restraint was absolutely necessary. No suspicion was entertained of the condition of the woman when she was put *en camisole* and transferred to the lodge, but had the fact been ascertained the treatment would have been substantially the same. The important fact was brought out upon cross-examination that it is not customary to make a thorough examination of the condition of new patients.

Dr. Robert L. Kingston corroborated the statement of Dr. Strew, and added that even when Miss Morrison was seized with preliminary pangs on the night of Oct. 11 it was not for a moment suspected that the pain was of other than gastric origin. She was in the habit of eating grass or anything else that she could lay her hands upon, and this sufficiently accounted for her tortures, in the absence of an examination, for which in the majority of instances he saw no necessity.

Dr. Livingston S. Hinckley's testimony coincided with that of the preceding witnesses.

In the case of Caroline Weil, only two witnesses—Dr. Strew and Dr. Leonard F. Pitkin—were examined. Her disease, Dr. Strew said, was edema of the lungs. She took her meals with regularity until the night of Oct. 8, when she refused her supper. As she ate no breakfast or dinner the next day, Oct. 9, and was still obstinate on the second day of abstinence, Oct. 10, food was administered that evening by means of the feeding-pump, and a hypodermic injection of morphia was given, but the latter had no agency in causing her death at 11:30 that night. Dr. Pitkin deposed that she was not emaciated by want of food, and that the primary cause of her death was meningitis, leading to heart-failure, and consequent serous suffusion of the lungs. The starvation story was concocted with malicious intent by a nurse named Margaret Modeller, who had been dismissed for carelessness in leaving arsenic where a patient could obtain access to it. This led to a statement by Dr. Strew of the circumstances of the alleged arsenical poisoning in the latter part of September. It appears, from his version of the affair, that the nurse mixed some arsenic with butter and sugar to kill rats, and put it in a pudding-pan at the bottom of an empty slop-pail. The patient mistook it for pudding. It was discovered in her possession, and taken from her by a nurse; but it was not believed that she had eaten any of it, nor was any attempt made to find out whether she had or not. As the members of the committee smiled as significantly when this admission was made as they had previously done when the necessity for careful examination of new patients was denied, Dr. Strew ceased his confidential revelations in this direction, and the examining physicians soon after took leave.

Speaking unofficially last night, one of the most expert members of the Consulting Board said that, in his opinion, the three cases just detailed had been extremely exaggerated. At the same time, evidence of negligence, want of system, and highly censurable mismanagement of the Lunatic Asylum has been elicited by the board, and will be made the subject of a report in which just and severe but candid and temperate criticism may be expected. The medical gentlemen upon whom the work has devolved labor under difficulties of a peculiar description. It is an open secret—and one member of the board says he has seen the manuscript of such articles—that the columns of several of our daily newspapers have teemed for the last few weeks with professedly candid, but really biased, criticisms of Asylum management on Blackwell's Island.

What the report on the three cases investigated on Wednesday will be, unofficial expressions of members of the board leave very little room for conjecture, their importance having been grossly exaggerated for presumably ulterior purposes. This report will be put in next week. But there will come another presently that will be worth printing.