THE TRAINING OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS*

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In dealing with the subject assigned to me for this meeting, it seemed advisable to begin with a brief review of the early days of the modern development of occupational therapy, and the definite training of workers for it, which ensued.

The inception of the first training course in occupations, established in the Chicago School of Philanthropy, had as its foundation the need of mental patients and, under a State grant of funds, was offered to a selected group of nurses. This was a six weeks’ course and superintendents of hospitals from many states were invited to nominate a candidate for the course, which was given without fee. It should be added that, even at that somewhat remote date, along with intensive instruction in occupations, physical training, recreation, folk dancing, etc., occupied part of the program of each day’s work.

There was not a great deal of enthusiasm on the part of those in attendance. Nursing was their objective and occupational duties appeared to be just another heavy task added to their already overflowing program.

The second year that the course was given, social service workers and special attendants were also included in the invitation to attend the course of training, with about the same result so far as interest was concerned, and not until the course was offered to technically trained persons who had an insight into social economics and philanthropic endeavor, plus some vision as to what “it was all about,” as well as a desire for service, was there secured for permanent work in hospitals the very small interested group who have blazed the trail for the professionally trained group now known as occupational therapists.

At the conclusion of the third year’s summer course, the State withdrew support and the experimental classes were discontinued.

It is scarcely necessary to remind this audience that occupational therapy did not begin in the army hospitals in the World War, as

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it is sometimes said to have done; for curative occupations were in use—although seldom well organized—in many hospitals for mental and nervous patients long before the war. The majority of workers in curative occupations in those days, however, were usually persons with some little skill in handcrafts who "learned by doing" or "on the job" (as we say), the art of dealing with patients; for, until the entry of the United States into the World War, there was only one organized school of training for occupational therapists in this country.

When, however, General Pershing, after observing the wide use that was being made of curative occupations in the war hospitals of the allied and associated nations in Europe, cabled to the Surgeon-General in Washington for 1,000 occupational therapy "aides", as they were termed by the army authorities, a number of emergency courses were established in a very short time. Most of these courses were abandoned after the war emergency had passed but several of the courses were developed into regular training schools which are in existence today, and comply with the latest requirements in their curricula and methods. To these further reference will later be made.

This is not, by any means, the first occasion on which the matter of the establishment of a training school for occupational therapists under the auspices of our State hospital system has been under consideration. Nearly nine years ago, the Commissioners discussed with me the possibility of starting a training course in order to be assured of a supply of properly trained workers for our institutions in the future; but before the proposed course could be organized, there were indications that the conditions affecting the professional training of occupational therapists were in a state of transition, and that various changes in methods were imminent. Subsequent events have shown that those indications have been fully borne out, and the professional training of occupational therapists has since been broadened and further developed until it is, today, on a more scientific basis; while at the same time it is eminently practical and is also given on approved pedagogical lines.

Several years ago, another proposal was made; namely, that a post-graduate course be established under the State hospital system for workers who wish to improve their knowledge and attain