

NURSING BY PIGMENT

Nurse B. V. LA GUMA

Chairman, Cape Town Nurses' Vigilance Committee

“WE require power to effect separation in all aspects of the nursing services, to differentiate in the training between the different races, keep separate registers to differentiate in respect of the training according to existing needs, in other words, for skilful and less skilful nurses, with regard to both race and duties.”—*Advocate van Reenen, S.A. Nursing Council, giving evidence before the Parliamentary Select Committee on the Nursing Amendment Bill.*

The Nursing Amendment Act was passed during the 1957 Parliamentary Session despite country-wide opposition and protests on the part of both members of the nursing profession and the general public; and, like other pieces of discriminatory legislation such as the notorious Group Areas Act and the Industrial Conciliation Act, it is designed to relegate the non-White people of South Africa to a status of permanent inferiority.

Prior to the introduction of the Bill, a Select Committee was appointed by Parliament to take evidence on the subject matter of the Bill, and to this committee came members of the S.A. Nursing Council, the S.A. Nursing Association and the Transvaal Administration to provide some excuse for the introduction of racialism into a profession which in all other parts of the world embraces a dignity and nobility which its objects demand of it.

“We want the non-Europeans to have the *guidance* of the European nurse, who will *advise* and keep them on the right road. We have to retain *control* over the non-Europeans. . . .”

“You know that right throughout South Africa it is said that non-Europeans are not capable of taking responsibility.”

“We have to choose between a professional service to the people of South Africa or just a technical service on the lowest possible level *as it exists to-day in all countries where nursing services are run by non-Whites.*”

These are but a few of the examples of the ‘evidence’ which, together with the racist platitudes of Nationalist parliamentarians, speeded the Nursing Act onto the Statute Books of South Africa.

The Nursing Act now lays down that no non-White nurse may be elected to the Nursing Council or to the Board of the

Nursing Association, and any representations to the Council will have to be made via 'advisory committees'; but, at the same time, membership and the payment of contributions to the Association are compulsory for *all* nurses. In other words, non-European nurses, having been completely disenfranchised, must continue to belong to the colour-bar Association in order to continue to practise nursing. Furthermore, the provisions of the Act stipulate that separate branches of the Nursing Association shall be established for White, African and Coloured nurses in each regional area. The Nursing Council may provide different uniforms, shoulder-badges and other insignia for non-European nurses, the Act continues, and the Council shall keep separate registers for the different racial groups. Powers are also given to the Council to provide separate training for European and non-European nurses, while the law makes it a criminal offence, punishable by a maximum fine of £200, for a non-White nurse to be placed in authority over a White one.

Opposition to the Act did not cease with its promulgation on July 24. Instead it created a new situation which demanded new tactics, quickly adopted by the non-European members of the profession. All separate branch meetings have been boycotted by non-White nurses, and demands for an alternative to the colour-bar Nursing Association, a new, non-discriminatory organization, have been pressed from all centres where non-European nurses are up in arms against the Act.

A new multi-racial nursing organization will, of course, not be recognized by the Government, but it holds the promise of being representative of the true principles of the profession, and, with the support of the vast majority of democratically-minded nurses and the public, of emerging as the fighting champion of the nurses for the retainment of their status and the further civilizing of South African nursing. Internationally, too, there is the possibility that such an organization will receive recognition by the International Nursing Council, in place of the racialistic Association.

The non-White nurses, and all other democrats in the nursing world, have been placed beside the millions of other South Africans struggling against Nationalist 'baaskap' and apartheid, for the right to live as free and dignified citizens of this country.

With enough determination, the bright flame of Florence Nightingale's lamp will rise to dispel the darkness that has so overwhelmed a noble profession.