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A promise unfulfilled

STRIKE action is threatened by 1,400 nurses in the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals because the Government has reneged on a promise to give them equal status with Government employed nurses. The promise, made five years ago, has not been fulfilled and it serves to highlight the sorry state of the nursing profession in Hongkong.

Despite an apparently smooth surface there is considerable discontent among the nursing profession as a whole. One of the chief causes of this is the general feeling that the Government just does not care. Nurses in Hongkong have a strong feeling that the nurse in our community does not enjoy the standing in Hongkong as in other parts of the world.

But it goes deeper than just a feeling of lack of attention from the Government. Lack of adequate training facilities, a shortage of equipment, the fact that nurses are required to carry out non-nursing jobs such as overseeing minor staff or taking inventories when they should be dealing with patients, plus an acute shortage of nurses, has taken its toll.

Although there had been discontent for a great number of years in the nursing profession, it was not until a nursing trainee committed suicide in 1973, because she felt she was discriminated against during training, that any real effort was made to look into the numerous grievances that had been receiving short shrift when placed before the Government. Nursing expert Mary Lamb came out from Britain in 1974 and six weeks later delivered a scathing report on the working and training conditions of nurses in Hongkong.

Miss Lamb's disclosures on the low morale of Hongkong nurses hardly came as a surprise. The attraction of this very essential profession as a career for young women and men had lost its Florence Nightingale image a very long time ago. Very few people are willing to be overworked and underpaid for the often unpleasant duties they have to undertake while looking after the sick. Dedication, as with almost all other professions today, has its price.

And yet the continuous supply of nurses for Hongkong's well being is as essential as that of doctors. We cannot risk dropping off this supply and as there has been very little done to improve things since the Lamb report was made, this becomes a real danger.

The argument put forward against any changes that we have to take into consideration that we are living in a limited space and that these chronic conditions are not limited to the nursing profession is completely spurious.

Other professions do not have to work with inadequate equipment such as a shortage of thermometers, so that rectal thermometers are used carrying a risk of spreading infectious diseases among the patients. Other professions do not find themselves with an increasing number of sick people to be taken care of within a given time.

It is in the interests of the public that the conditions under which our nurses work be made reasonably respectable. With an increase from eight million patients in 1971 to more than 13 million this year, it becomes obvious to everyone that more nurses need to be attracted to the profession.

We have taken a step in the right direction on the labour scene by introducing legislation bringing benefits to the workers. It is well past time that the Government turned its thoughts to the conditions under which nurses are working and took steps to introduce much needed reforms in this sphere.