Is The Situation Serious?

Almost a half century ago, a young nurse was stopped in the corridors of the old Lakeside Hospital in Cleveland. “Come to see me tomorrow,” she was told, “I’m going to make you an anesthetist.” The man who addressed her was the great surgeon, George Crile, and the young nurse, Agatha Hodgins, was later to found the first school for nurse anesthetists under his direction. Even earlier, another nurse, Alice MaGaw, had been appointed an anesthetist at the Mayo Clinic. In the footsteps of these women, other nurse anesthetists followed to serve great surgeons throughout the country—Harvey Cushing, Evarts Graham, Claude Beck, and Alfred Blalock, to name only a few. Today, nurses are employed as anesthetists in approximately 96 per cent of the nation’s outstanding hospitals, and the demand for the trained nurse anesthetist is still greater than the supply.

Recently, in the lay press, articles have appeared which have tended to disparage the contribution of the nurse anesthetist. As is often true when a lay writer handles a professional subject, the facts have been distorted. Moreover, there is no evidence that these articles were either sponsored by, or motivated by pressure from, any professional group.

What is to be our answer to this unfortunate publicity? We do not wish to behave like the ostrich, nor do we wish to engage in fruitless rebuttal. The publication of such articles should certainly be discouraged. However, the positive answer to the challenge is to continue to improve the standards of the nurse anesthetist and to give the medical profession the same loyal service that has been given in the past, in order that the nurse anesthetist may receive the recognition she deserves. Recently, the contribution of the nurse anesthetist has been publically acknowledged by Evarts Graham and Frank Bradley, and Dr. Graham’s viewpoint has been disseminated by the hospital press. For those who would challenge the position of the nurse anesthetist, there is an old saying that should someone “build a better mousetrap, the world will clear a path to his door.”—G. F.