

Circular letter to the physicians of Kentucky.

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Linton, M. L. 1808-1872.
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Publication/Creation

Maysville, Ky. : Lewis Collins, printer, 1842.

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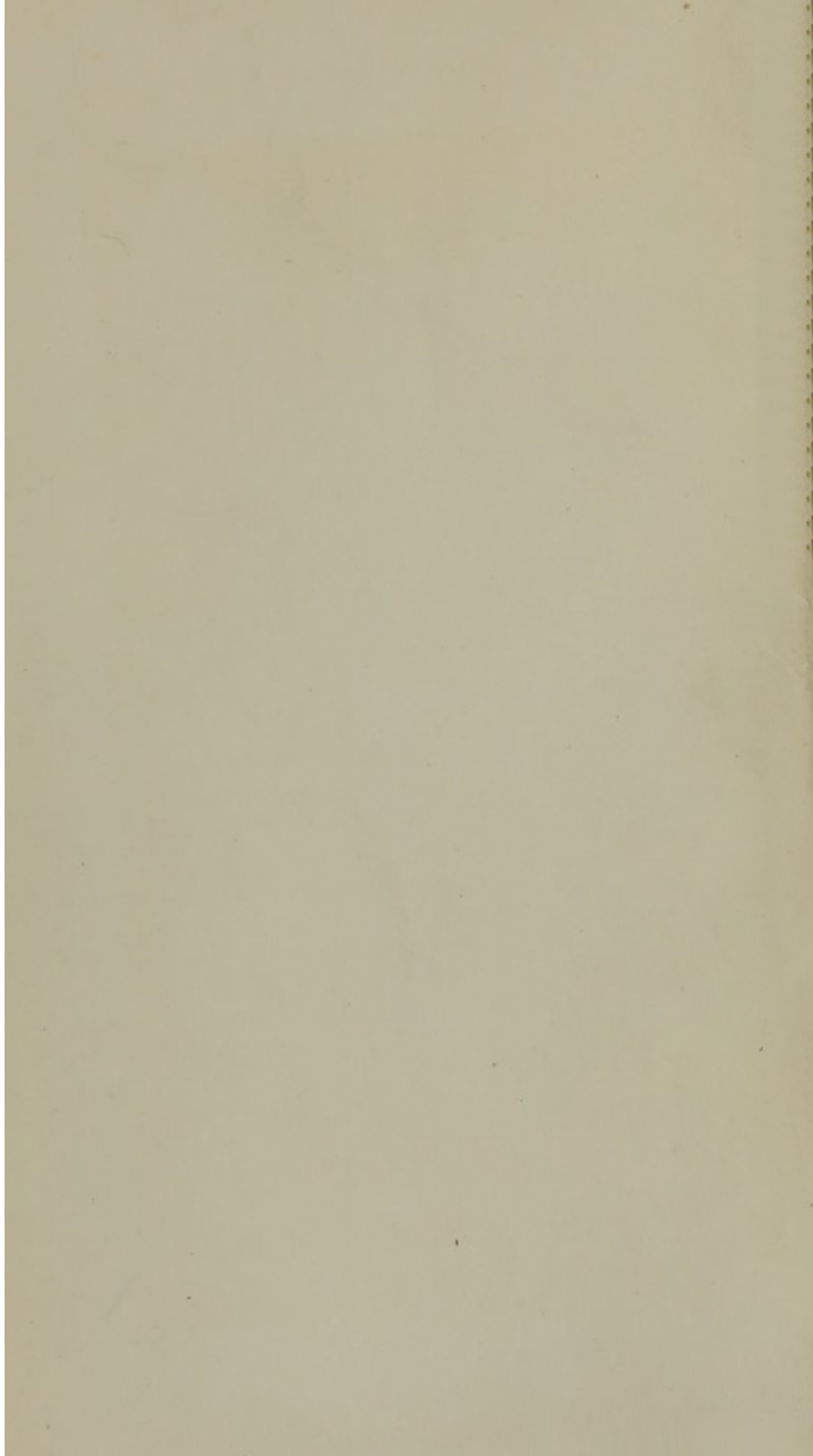


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1842

CIRCULAR LETTER TO
THE PHYSICIANS OF
KENTUCKY

1842



Robley Douglas **DOCUMENT**

CIRCULAR LETTER

TO THE

PHYSICIANS OF KENTUCKY.

Genl's Office
3034 1/2
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Linton, Moses L

MAYSVILLE, KY.

LEWIS COLLINS--PRINTER.

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The State Medical Convention of Kentucky met at Frankfort, in January, 1841, and adopted a Constitution, elected officers, &c. and resolved to meet again on the 12th of January, 1842, but failed to meet—a quorum not being present. On the 14th of January the following gentlemen met: Drs. Hughes of Henry, Burnet of Trigg, Cox of Nelson, Taylor of Union, Walker of Madison, Bennet of Kenton, Sharpe, Roberts, Watson and Sneed of Frankfort, Duke of Maysville, and Palmer and Linton of Springfield. On motion, Dr. Palmer was appointed Chairman and Dr. Duke, Secretary.

Dr. Duke read a paper on Medical Education.

Dr. Linton read an address upon the formation of a Board of Medical Examiners, and offered the following resolution, which was unanimously adopted:

Resolved, That the interests of the medical profession, and of the public in general, would be promoted by the establishment of a board of examining physicians, who shall meet annually for the purpose of conferring diplomas on all candidates who may be found worthy upon a rigorous examination.

It was further resolved, that a committee be appointed to prepare an address to the profession throughout the State, exhibiting the advantages which would accrue to them, by carrying out the foregoing resolution, and inviting them to join with this meeting in praying the Legislature to establish such a board at its next session. Drs. Linton, Duke, Burnet and Bennet, were appointed that committee. The meeting then adjourned until the 15th, when the following additional gentlemen attended: Drs. Lewis, Sneed and Dickinson of Frankfort, Hensley and Blackburn of Woodford, Guillian and Miles of Livingston, and Noe of Canton.

Dr. Hughes introduced a resolution as to the manner of establishing the board which was approved by the meeting, and Drs. Hughes, Palmer and Burnet appointed a committee to draft its details.

Dr. Linton, from the committee appointed, read the following circular—it was unanimously adopted; and the Secretary ordered to print and distribute one thousand copies—the meeting then adjourned.

JNO. M. DUKE, Sec'y. R. C. PALMER, Pres't.

DEAR SIR;—In compliance with the above resolution, we proceed to lay before you, as briefly as possible, the many and great advantages which we believe will necessarily result from the establishment of the board alluded to; and we doubt not that every physician in the State will hail with delight, and examine with deep interest, any project for the advancement of medical science, the promotion of the cause of humanity and the elevation of the character of the profession.

You have witnessed the late effort on the part of the physicians of Kentucky, to organize themselves into a State Society, and District Societies in correspondence with it. Their object was, no doubt, the advancement of the great interests of the profession and the public. Their first convention was held in Frankfort in the month of January, 1841; some sixty or seventy physicians from the various parts of the State attended, but unfortunately nothing was done at all, adequate to the grand object. After enjoying some scientific repasts, in the form of learned papers and lectures, the convention adjourned, fixing upon the 12th of January, 1842, for its second meeting. In the mean time the physicians throughout the State were notified thereof and urged to attend. The time for the meeting arrived, and as might have been expected, not more than a dozen physicians convened, and the meeting immediately adjourned *sine die*. What was there to induce them to forsake their practice and fireside comforts, and incur the fatigue and expense of a of a winter journey to Frankfort? Nothing. The manner in which the *first* meeting passed off convinced them that their interests, and the interests of humanity were not likely to be subserved by a *second*. In a word, they had no motive to attend—a fact by which their absence is at once explained and excused.

Still we are not disposed to abandon the grand object

alluded to, and have consequently sprung up into life and organization, as it were, from the ashes of the dead convention, with the determination of making another, and we believe far more rational effort to elevate our profession to the high stand to which it is entitled by its philanthropic and God-like nature. That this cannot be done by merely meeting in Frankfort once a year, to hear papers read and pass a few resolutions in relation to medical ethics and empiricism, we are ready to admit; for as to the papers, they can find a vehicle to the door of every physician, through the press, and as to our prescriptions of quackery, time will prove them to be unavailing—*‘vox et præterea nihil.’*

But to come directly to the question. What will best promote our interests and respectability as a profession? Our recipe is short and simple, but the facts and arguments by which its efficiency is sustained, are ample and cogent. Establish a board of Physicians and Surgeons, empowered, as indicated in our resolution, and let this board or college be sworn to require a higher degree of qualification than has hitherto been required in the State, or we might say the United States. All that this college or board of censors should require on the part of the student, should be adequate professional qualification, not one cent of that, the inordinate love of which is the root of so many evils, as well in medicine as elsewhere. To be sure, if the State would defray the expenses of the board, a fee might be required of the student to indemnify the State, which we think would be the best possible arrangement. Let it, however, be clearly understood, that we do not propose to tax the State without fully indemnifying it; nor do we desire any enactment binding present or future practitioners to undergo the severe examinations which it will be the duty of the board to institute. We wish it to stand upon its own intrinsic merits, unsustained by Legislative coercion.

Now, the immediate result of the establishment of such a board would be to throw medical teaching, in a great measure, into the hands of the practitioners

throughout the State, and the result of this again would be that every physician in the State would exert himself to become qualified to discharge the duties of a medical instructor; and thus rendering himself adequate to the profitable, pleasing and honorable task of teaching his pupils, he would become more learned in his profession and, consequently, more useful to the public.

But it may be asked, how would the establishment of this board throw these important privileges and incentives to exertion into the hands of the practitioner? The answer is at hand. The board would require nothing but knowledge as a passport to its honors, without prescribing the mode in which this knowledge should be acquired. Now, the truth is, that this knowledge can be acquired as well in the shop of the intelligent practitioner as in the halls of the schools, *and at a much cheaper rate*—and thus the question is answered plainly enough for the apprehension of every one.

But is the assertion true that the necessary knowledge can be obtained, as well with the intelligent practitioner as with the professor? Why, if this ground be disputed, we will take a bolder and still quite as tenable a position, viz: That nearly all the branches can be better taught and more perfectly understood and digested with the former than with the latter. Who will deny this to be true of materia medica? It would indeed be difficult to demonstrate that the reading of standard works on this department, under the supervision of an intelligent preceptor, whose shop affords nearly all the objects of the study, would not be as advantageous to the student as listening to the reading of a course or two of lectures, however learned on the same subject.

Is there any reason why the practice of medicine cannot be learned as well by the aid of the best works extant and a good preceptor, whose numerous patients present the various forms of disease, as by listening to the reading of lectures which, if published in the form of a book, would not surpass the scores of books on the same subject, already in our possession?

We put these questions candidly, and assert, without the fear of refutation, that they apply equally to nearly all the branches of the science. We are sorry to be under the necessity of instituting such comparisons, but the nature of the subject demands them, and we cannot shrink from our duty, though in its performance we may assail the doctrines and views of those whom we esteem, not only as men, but as philosophers. So confident are we, however, of the justice and utility of our measure, that we believe every one who examines it dispassionately will forthwith become its friend and advocate.

We are free to admit that the remarks we have made in regard to the greater number of the branches of medicine, do not so well apply to Chemistry, Anatomy, and Surgery. The former, however, is not necessary in a great degree to the qualification of skilful physicians and surgeons. There are not, perhaps, in the State, a great many physicians qualified to teach Anatomy and Surgery; still there are some, and if this board be established, scores of others will spring up as by enchantment, and these important branches will be cultivated with a zeal hitherto unknown amongst us. Let us examine, for a moment, the mode of teaching these and their kindred departments of science.

It is well known that a teacher of mediocre talents and learning can instruct five or six students better than the most gifted and erudite can teach five or six hundred. The reason is obvious, and it is felt and acted upon throughout Europe, but in a greater degree in Paris than perhaps any where else. The student would prefer the private instructions of Cruvelheir and Velpeau to those of Barth and Chassaignac, but the celebrity and the station of the former draw around them crowds that render them inaccessible, whilst the latter are quite accessible, and sufficiently qualified to teach. Nothing is more easy to demonstrate, than that private instruction is far more advantageous than public. In Paris, where there are always thousands of students from the various nations of the world, the former mode is in full vogue. The public

lectures in the schools and hospitals are all gratuitous and accessible to every one; and yet the students neglect the lectures to attend private instructions, though they are obliged to pay for them. Does the student wish to acquire a practical acquaintance with the stethoscope, he employs some intelligent sub-physician of a hospital to teach him. Does he wish to study diseases of the skin, he goes to the hospital of St. Louis and engages some of the Internes to teach him by showing him all the cases of Psoriasis, Eczema, Ichthyosis, Lepra, &c. &c. &c. point out to him their distinctive marks, and acquaint him with the most approved modes of treating them. This could not be done by the chief physician with several hundred students in his train, much less by the lecturer in the school. The sub-physician or Interne never has more than five or six students in his class. He could not do justice to more.

The same remarks apply to the teaching of Anatomy and Surgery, especially operations on the dead body, bandaging, obstetrics, and to all the branches of the profession in which seeing and manual dexterity are required. The reason of this is plain and may be expressed in the saying so common among the French, that "*what one sees and feels make a deeper and clearer impression than what one simply hears.*" The public teacher cannot make *three or four hundred students* see and handle, and deliberately examine these things and afford them the necessary explanations—answering the queries and solving the difficulties of each and every one. The private teacher can afford these incalculable advantages to *five or six*. If, then, reason and custom, and the highest authorities are to be regarded, attending lectures and following professors through crowded wards are not the best means of acquiring knowledge, *in any department of the profession.*

But suppose that students do find it necessary to go to large cities to complete their studies of some of the branches. We say let them go. We shall advise them,

urge them to go and avail themselves of all the means afforded by chartered colleges, private associations and well qualified individuals. We do not wish to tear down the schools, but to devise a plan by the operation of which those rights which are common to the entire profession, may not be entirely engrossed by the *few* to the manifest injury of the *many*.

We return, then, to the proposition that the establishment of an examining college would cause medical lecturing to devolve in part upon practicing physicians. It would act for our good, prospectively, in stimulating our youth to higher attainments, and retrospectively, in urging the present race of physicians to close study, in order to be enabled to discharge the profitable, honorable and responsible duties devolving upon them. Inaccessible to sinister influences, its honors would be the reward of genius and industry;—requiring nothing but that which study alone can bestow, it would place the rich and the poor upon an equal footing;—the sworn guardian of professional weal and public health, its sanction would be sought with avidity by the student, and regarded as the highest evidence of adequate qualification by the community. It would elevate the standard of professional excellence, pave the way by which that standard may be reached by those who are to succeed us, and thus secure to present and future generations the inestimable boon of well qualified practitioners in the Divine art of healing. In other words, it would promote the interests of the profession and of the public. Let us examine briefly the objections which may be urged against the establishment of such a board.

Will it be said that there cannot be found in the State, five or six physicians sufficiently learned to constitute it? Such a charge would be alike unfounded and insulting, notwithstanding the dearth of learned physicians caused by the state of things which we wish to reform.

Will it be objected that the board will not be respectable and popular? It cannot, in the nature of things, be otherwise, if it require the high degree of qualification alluded to.

Will it be further urged that even under the present state of things, a portion of medical teaching devolves upon the practitioner, as it is his province to prepare the student for the lectures? This objection is destitute of foundation; for, all that is necessary in order to the student's graduation, is, that he attend *two* courses of lectures with *tolerable industry*. True we believe that there is something like a law with the schools, requiring young men to study a year or two with a physician preparatory to attending the lectures; but this law is a dead letter. If the student but attends the two courses and answers with tolerable facility, the questions of an hour, he is forthwith an M. D.

But suppose these institutions did rigorously require on the part of the student a year or so of preparatory study? What of it? Student and preceptor both know that the former can pass his examination without such study. The student feels independent and the preceptor careless; and thus the preparatory study is "lost time," or to say the least of it, time not very profitably spent. Indeed, what is there under the present state of things, to stimulate the preceptor to exert himself for his pupil? Neither gain nor glory. Students will not pay for preparatory instruction, when they are aware that the lectures will perform the double office of carrying them in triumph through the green box and draining their pockets. Money is far more important to them than preparatory instruction, and can they be expected to change the former for the latter?

But suppose that well qualified physicians should require a fee of their pupils? Why, they would get no pupils—for there are always those who are not qualified, who would take them gratuitously, and such men, we admit, can very well *prepare* them for obtaining honors which can be obtained without any preparation at all!

If it be urged that the patronage of the schools will be injured by the measure we advocate, we would ask whether the general good ought to be sacrificed to the in-

terests of the few? But if the schools be necessary to qualify young men for passing rigorous examinations, their patronage would be rather increased than diminished; and if they are not necessary why impose upon the profession the necessity of paying extravagant sums for that which can be obtained elsewhere and upon better terms? This would indeed be strengthening a monopoly with a bonus, and purchasing oppression at the price of the means by which it should be countervailed.

The truth is, that the establishment of this board would place the schools on the only ground which they should, occupy—that of their real merit and utility—and that they possess both, and are capable of a great deal more we are free to admit. Our object is not to injure them but to benefit the profession. We do not wish to see medical teaching wrested from their hands, but that a part of it be retained in the hands of their brethren. We do not wish to dash the cup of nectar from their lips, but to see the profession at large aroused from a state of collapse and lethargy by a few drops of its inspiring contents.

We think it proper to make a distinction between our professors and the schools to which they belong. This is dictated alike by a sense of justice and our own feelings. The former, so far as any acquaintance extends, are worthy of higher encomiums than perhaps our pen can award—we respect them as men and revere them as philosophers. All this, however, is perfectly compatible with our objections to the present economy of their schools. We shall not presume to propose what we think the necessary changes, we only propose a measure which does not touch their constitution, but which will afford to the profession at large an incentive to industry and scientific zeal which cannot fail to redound to our honor and respectability as a body and the good of our species.

In a measure so fraught with advantages, we have a right to expect the able and hearty co-operation of the professors themselves. It is not certain that they would be injured by it even in a pecuniary point of view—because a higher standard of qualification would render

more teaching necessary. But even if their income should be a little curtailed, we have no right to fear that they are not prepared for a greater sacrifice, if they believe it will be offered up on the great altar of public utility.

It is a little surprising that we are politically a republic and medically an oligarchy, whilst in most of the nations of Europe medicine is a republic and government a species of oligarchy. The state of things in regard to medicine which we wish to bring about is essentially that which exists in the old world. Ireland, for example, has a dozen medical schools and but one examining college of physicians. The examining boards of Surgeons and Physicians in London, which are as high tribunals as any of the kind in the world, do not require candidates for diplomas to attend prescribed courses of lectures. They require a high degree of qualification, and this the candidate may obtain from private teachers or public lectures. Moreover, any Physician or Surgeon may be a lecturer, for there is no monopoly. This gives a powerful stimulus, fair play and "ample room and verge enough" to talents and industry. To this wise policy England is indebted for her Hunters, her Abernethys, her Coopers, and her Lawrences. This is what we want--this is just, and this, the state of the profession imperiously demands. A thorough knowledge of human nature and the experience of ages have proven this to be the best course and why it is so would not be difficult to demonstrate. The concentration of the various departments of power and patronage into the hands of the few not only leads to abuses but paralyzes the energies of the many. What would be thought of placing the legislative, judicial and executive powers in the hands of one body without check or control? Closely analagous to what this would be in government, is the present condition of medical affairs, and the result is deplorable. Let us then have the necessary check to balance, let us adopt the plan which experience and reason have proven to be best, and which common sense unites with common justice in demanding, that

we may enjoy the blessedness of republicanism in science and letters as well as in government.

The zeal with which we believe you are inspired, for the good of our common profession and the cause of humanity, has induced us to address you this circular. We have treated the subject as briefly as possible, knowing that all that is necessary to the success of the measure proposed, is that the mind of the profession be brought to bear upon it and contemplate its many and inestimable advantages.

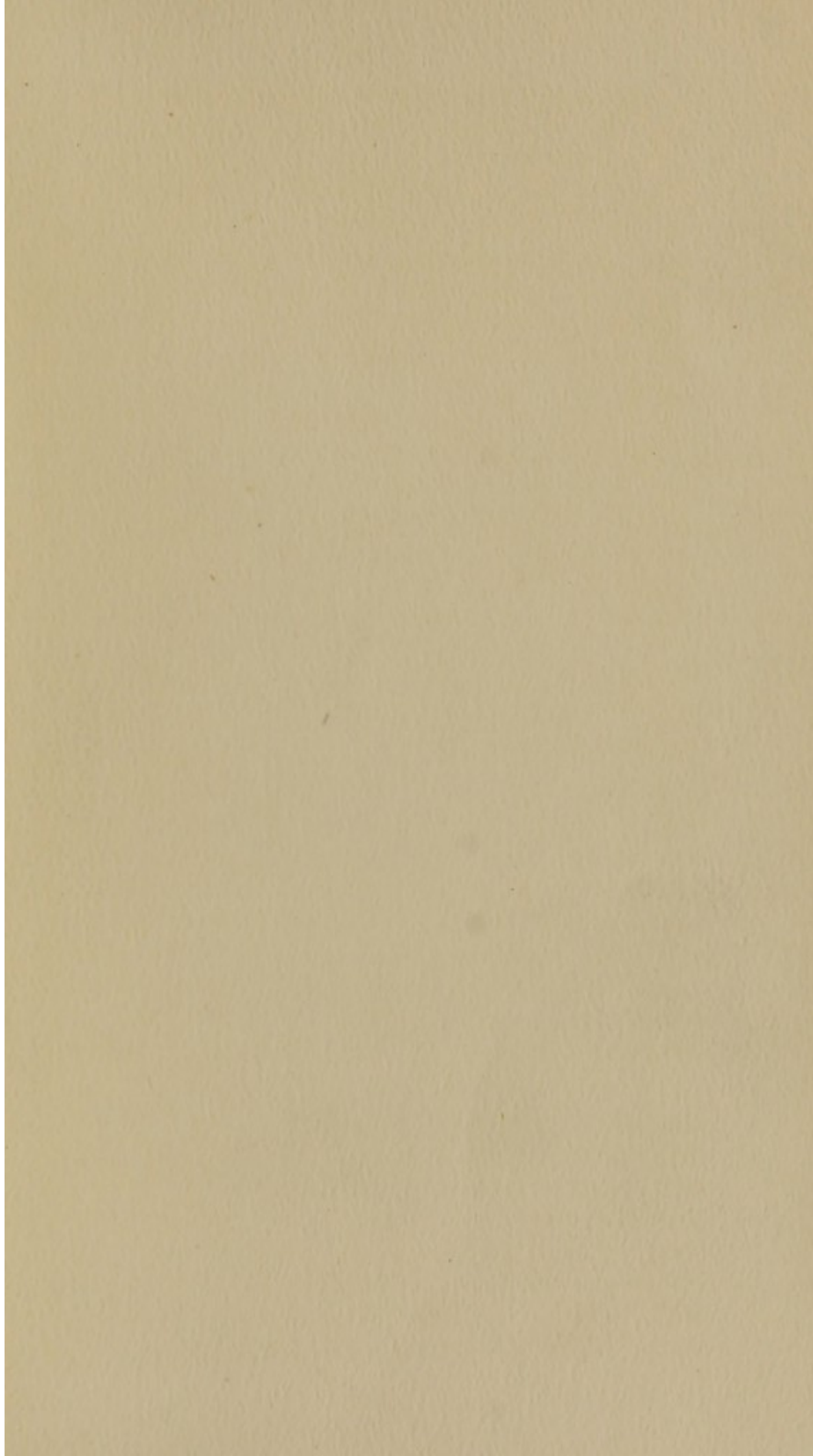
If you concur with us we hope you will immediately call a meeting of your fellow-physicians, and transmit your names to our Secretary (Dr. Duke of Maysville,) petitioning the Legislature to grant us a board, such as we have designated. We would request you also to engage in its favor your county representation and meet us in Frankfort if you can, at the next session of the Legislature. The object is worthy of your exertions, and we do not fear that you will be wanting in the discharge of your duty to yourselves individually, to the profession at large, and to the public.

M. L. LINTON,

JNO. M. DUKE,

J. BENNET,

J. BURNET,



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