

[Letter to the Right Hon. Viscount Palmerston, with regard to the Bills proposed for medical reform].

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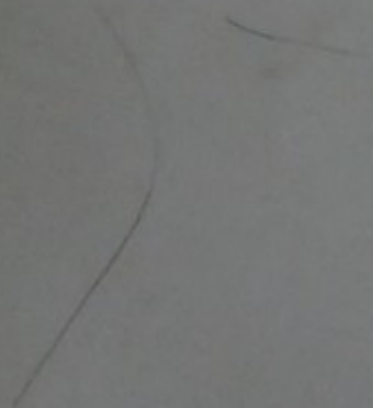
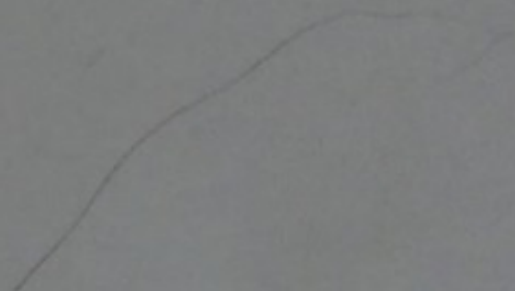
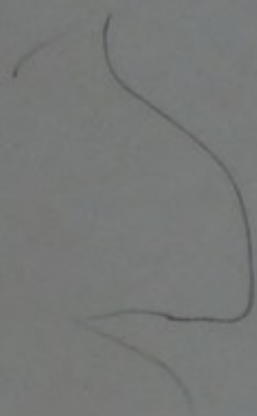
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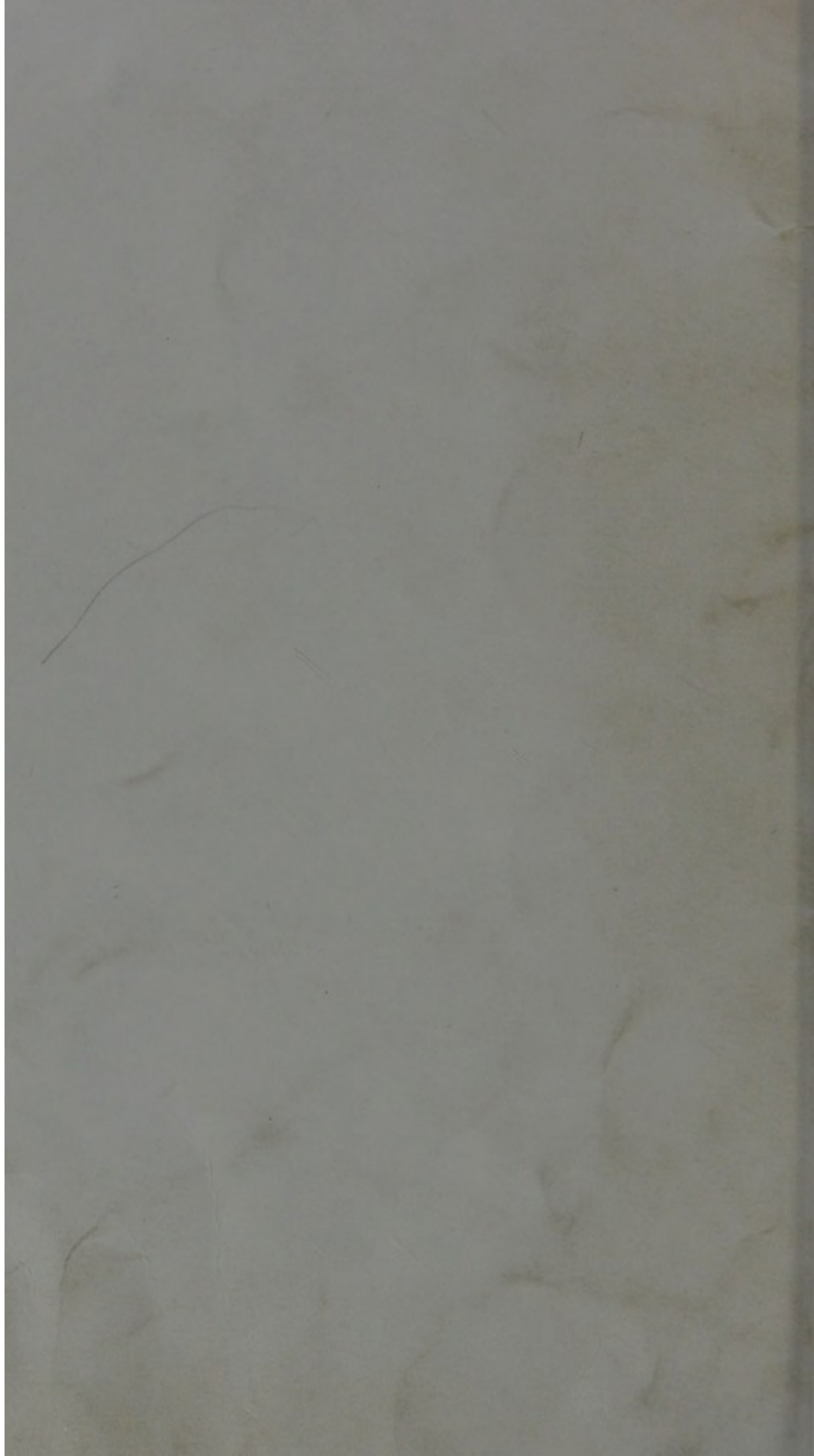
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TO THE

RIGHT HON. VISCOUNT PALMERSTON.

MY LORD,

The discussion which has lately taken place, both in and out of Parliament, with regard to the bills proposed for Medical Reform, must have satisfied even those who are least acquainted with this subject that it urgently requires legislative interference. Indeed, the fact that it is at present impossible, by any extent of education or examination, in Scotland or Ireland, to obtain the right of practising as a Physician or Apothecary in England without incurring the penalties of a criminal prosecution, appears so inconsistent with reason and justice, as to admit of explanation only by supposing it unknown to those who have the power of affording redress. But now that the attention of the Legislature and the Government has been called to the anomalous and objectionable condition in which the Medical Profession has been permitted to languish, it cannot be doubted that some measure of relief will be adopted; and the only room for question that remains, is how this object may be best accomplished.

Before deciding upon a measure of relief, it is necessary to determine what requires to be accomplished; and this may be done upon the present occasion very easily, if the interests of individuals and corporate bodies are not held

paramount to those of the public and the profession. The object of legislative interferences is not to provide physicians or surgeons for the rich, but to protect the poorer classes of society from mismanagement by imperfectly educated practitioners. For, although it would be no less impracticable than inconsistent with the institutions of a free country to prevent the people of any rank from being doctored according to their own notions, however absurd, it is clearly the duty of Government to provide that the authority of a license to practise should be withheld from all persons who have not completed a sufficient course of preparation; while, on the other hand, this sanction should not, by the extent of requirement, be placed beyond the reach of those who propose to cultivate fields of practice promising only a scanty remuneration, since, in that case, the poor would be left destitute of professional advice.

All, then, really required is the establishment of this minimum, or absolutely essential amount of medical education, and the enforcement of its due observance. Mr Headlam proposed that the license to practise should be given solely by the Corporations. Lord Elcho, in his original Bill, instead of confining this privilege to Corporations, extended it also to the Universities which should be willing to comply with the regulations of a superintending body; while the Bill of the Select Committee not only refused the power of licensing to the Universities, but withdrew it from the Corporations, and placed it in the hands of Examining Boards altogether new. It is this last arrangement which has been so industriously represented as a "Scotch job," because the Universities of Scotland supported it, although manifestly not favourable to them, in the persuasion that Mr Headlam's Bill would be more injurious to the interests of the public. If they had been consulted on the matter, these Universities would certainly not have recommended the

appointment of new examining bodies ; knowing well that the existing Boards were quite sufficient for every useful purpose ; and also knowing that, as, in Scotland at least, the services of the men most competent to examine were thus already engaged, the new Boards would be inferior to the old ones, unless constructed from the same materials. Neither would the Universities have voluntarily consented that their degrees should cease to be regarded as qualifications for practice, which they have long been, in accordance with legal decisions and established usage, in Scotland. In the Northern Counties especially, a large proportion of the Medical Practitioners bear honourable testimony to the superiority of Academic education, being, for the most part, Graduates in Arts as well as Medicine, and although possessing no other qualification, being justly regarded as most eminently respectable. Indeed, when it is recollected that the Examiners of Universities are selected, by public authority, from the whole range of the profession—in Scotland, there are eighteen appointed by Government,—and that they teach the subjects on which they examine, there can be little hesitation in admitting, that their efficiency should be considered as at least equal to that of the nominees of corporate bodies, whose choice is limited to their own members, occupied, as they are for the most part, in the routine duty of general practice.

The Corporations object to University Examiners on two grounds ; and, in the first place, because, being teachers, they may be supposed partial to their own pupils. But, in offering this objection, they seem to forget that it is applicable also to themselves. For instance, the Edinburgh College of Surgeons has in its Board of Examiners several gentlemen who give lectures, which are advertised in a programme signed by the Secretary ; while nearly a half of the London College of Surgeons' Examiners are Teachers.

On the other hand, it may be remarked that the University of London possesses an Examining Board, which is not necessarily or entirely composed of teachers; and that that institution, as well as the Universities of Scotland, has expressed willingness to admit assessors from the Corporations, to obviate all pretext for the allegation of unfairness.

Secondly, The Corporations object to University Examiners, that they hold office for life, and consequently, through the infirmity of age, may become unfit for their duties, however competent to discharge them at an earlier period. But it should be recollected that a Professor cannot hold his place after he becomes unable to teach, and that, if able to teach, he may be fairly supposed able to examine; while in the Corporations there is no such check upon senility, or weakness from any other source, as may appear from the printed evidence of the late Mr Guthrie, with regard to the Examiners of his College. He there states, that the fees of Examination are looked upon as the most certain provision for old age, from being still drawn when all other sources of income have failed. It would, therefore, be prudent for the Corporations not to press this objection, especially as it does not apply to all Universities, since the Examiners of that in London are appointed annually. Such being the case, it may not unreasonably be maintained that the Examiners of Universities are nowise less entitled to confidence than those of the Corporations—who, indeed, have very decidedly, though apparently unconsciously, expressed the strongest testimony in their favour, by frankly conceding their right and title to confer the “highest honours of Medicine.” But if this be so, and if it is true that the major comprehends the minor, who can doubt that the same Examiners are competent to ascertain the claims of candidates for a lower qualification. The Corporations, indeed, say that their members are practical men, and, therefore, the

best judges of practical questions. But let me ask, who are the practising Physicians and Surgeons of Scotland? and if, with hardly any exception, they are not University Professors? An Examination in Surgery may surely be expected to be more practical if conducted by a man who is daily performing operations, and treating surgical cases, than by one who knows little of the subject except from reading or hearsay. As a qualification for practice, therefore, the University Examination would seem preferable to that of the Corporations, so as, in accordance with Continental custom, to admit of being advantageously substituted for it. But this has not been proposed, and all that is asked on the part of the Universities is, that degrees and diplomas shall be placed upon equality as titles to practise, provided they imply a sufficient amount of professional study. To this equality the Corporations object that there would be no longer any inducement to take their diplomas, and that the degrees of Universities would be preferred as being more honourable, while they were equally useful. It does not very clearly appear how the public interest would suffer from this result; and, so far as the Corporations are concerned, it should be recollected that their proper source of income is derived from the fees of admission to fellowship, which, if the body be deserving of respect, will be amply sufficient for its maintenance. In Edinburgh, the Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons derive their incomes from two very different sources—that of the former being entirely afforded by the fees of Fellows, and that of the latter chiefly from the issue of licenses. Now, the former body has built an elegant and commodious Hall—possesses an excellent library—has purchased a valuable museum of *materia medica*—and is accumulating capital. If, therefore, the recognition of degrees as qualifications for practice should happen to lessen the demand for diplomas, there will still be abundant means for

the prosperity of Corporations which manage their affairs with prudence.

In Mr Headlam's Bill it is proposed that all members of the Medical Profession, before obtaining permission to practise, should connect themselves with a College of Physicians or Surgeons, and have their names publicly registered in one or other of these capacities. Now, it is difficult to imagine anything more objectionable than such an arrangement. For, if the fellowship, which ought to be a reward of honourable distinction in practice, were to become obligatory at the outset of professional life, it would cease to operate as a stimulus to exertion, and be merely a tax for the benefit of Corporation coffers. Moreover, the titles of Physician and Surgeon have hitherto been severally understood to denote the cultivation of one department of practice, while it is notorious that the general wants of the community must be supplied by Medical Practitioners of all work; so that Mr Headlam's Register, according to the received meaning of words, would, for the most part, be nothing better than a tissue of misrepresentations, since some men who are living by the administration of pills and potions would be held forth as Physicians, while others, who are maintained by the administration of potions and pills, would appear as Surgeons. Such an attempt to classify Practitioners being no less dishonest than absurd, while it is equally impracticable to determine the grade which they are eventually to assume in practice by any process of education, it will, I trust, appear that the sole object of Medical Legislation should be to regulate the terms of that license without which no one ought to be admitted to the privileges of the Medical Profession—these being made the same throughout every part of Her Majesty's dominions.

When so many opposing interests are concerned, this important matter does not admit of any satisfactory set-

tlement, except by being confided to a body of men possessing the necessary information, and armed with sufficient powers to carry their resolutions into effect. In all the Bills for Medical Reform, the first step proposed has accordingly been the establishment of a regulating Council, the only difference of opinion with regard to it being the mode of constitution. To universal suffrage it has been objected that the result would be perpetual strife, and the return of members more remarkable for activity in canvassing than professional eminence. Nomination by the Crown is regarded with disfavour, as opposed to the right of self-government, which has been claimed for the profession. Mr Headlam's plan of forming a Council by representatives from all the Universities and Corporations, would constitute a body too numerous, and of a nature too heterogeneous, for working satisfactorily. But the following mode of overcoming this difficulty seems to me free from any serious objection:—Let each of the ten Universities, and each of the nine Medical Corporations, together with the Association of Provincial Practitioners in England, elect a representative, and to these twenty, let the Government add ten, so as to form a body of thirty, which might be named the General Council; and then let it elect ten of its members to be the Executive Council, of which the duty would be to determine the qualifications requisite for general practice; to ascertain what University and Corporations were willing to make this the minimum of their curriculum of study; to insure, by visitation and otherwise, that their regulations were duly observed; and to publish a Register of qualified Practitioners.

In conclusion, I beg leave to remark, that, as a measure of Medical Reform can act beneficially towards the profession only by operating upon the entrants to its ranks, it is necessary to exercise great caution in listening to the opinions of

Practitioners who, having passed the barrier, may not be sorry to see it strengthened against the admission of rivals. Thus the Bill of Mr Headlam, which flattered the vanity of industrious Apothecaries, by proposing to register them all as Physicians or Surgeons, while it threw every imaginable obstacle in the way of future aspirants, by complicating their course of study with endless examinations, by forcing them to become connected with Colleges, and by exposing them, no matter at how advanced a time of life, to the annoyance of a further ordeal, in the event of their wishing to pass from general to consulting practice, was vaunted as the "Bill of the Profession."

I have the honour to be,

MY LORD,

Your Lordship's most obedient servant,

JAMES SYME,

Regius Professor of Clinical Surgery in the
University of Edinburgh.

