

State of the sick poor.

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M. H. L. Smith

State of the Sick Poor.

FROM THE
LONDON MEDICAL REPOSITORY
AND
REVIEW,

No. 147, MARCH, 1826.

AT a MEETING of the MEDICAL and SURGICAL PRACTITIONERS of LEICESTER, held at the THREE CROWNS, by Adjournment from MARCH 16th to MARCH 17th, 1826,—To take into consideration the propriety of establishing DISTRICT DISPENSARIES, to be supported principally by *Self-dependent Labourers and Mechanics*, for themselves and Families, instead of obliging them to incur Debts, or apply to their Parishes for a Surgeon.

PRESENT.

W. W. ARNOLD, M.D. in the Chair.

Mr. T. Paget, sen., <i>Surgeon.</i>	Mr. T. Highton, <i>Surgeon.</i>
— T. Paget, jun., <i>Ditto.</i>	— — Denton, <i>Ditto.</i>
— John Nedham, <i>Ditto.</i>	— — Broughton, <i>Ditto.</i>
— Richard Oliver, <i>Ditto.</i>	— E. E. Wilkinson, <i>Ditto.</i>
— Daniel Gossitt, <i>Ditto.</i>	— Edward Fowler, <i>Ditto.</i>
— James Down, <i>Ditto.</i>	— — Stallard, <i>Ditto.</i>
— Charles Bloomar, <i>Ditto.</i>	— — Berridge, <i>Ditto.</i>

It was Proposed by Mr. PAGET, sen., Seconded by Mr. GOSSITT, and Resolved unanimously,—“That it appears to this Meeting, that the Practice of *farming the Parish Poor in Sickness*, is productive of numerous disadvantages to the Public,—to the sick Poor,—and to Medical Practitioners.”

It was Proposed by Mr. NEDHAM, and Seconded by Mr. PAGET, Jun. and Resolved unanimously,—“That the Persons present at this Meeting, consider it to be incumbent on them, after attending to the statement made to them by Mr. SMITH, of *Southam*, (in addition to the information that has been laid before them by some of the Gentlemen present,) to endeavour by their influence and by their example, to discourage such Practice.”

It was Proposed by Mr. BLOOMAR, Seconded by Mr. HIGHTON, and Resolved unanimously,—“That without coming to any hasty conclusion concerning the best Plan of effecting so desirable an object, they consider that proposed by Mr. SMITH as deserving the fullest consideration, and that he has the permission of this Meeting to publish the foregoing Resolutions in any way he may think proper.”

It was Proposed by Mr. PAGET, jun., and Seconded by Mr. GOSSITT,—“That the Thanks of this Meeting be unanimously given to Mr. SMITH, for the zeal and perseverance with which he has pursued his inquiries, and made his exposition of the condition of the Sick Poor.”

(Signed) W. W. ARNOLD, *Chairman.*

Dr. ARNOLD having left the Chair, the unanimous Thanks of the Meeting were given him for his liberal and impartial conduct.

THE LONDON MEDICAL REPOSITORY AND REVIEW.

No. 147.

MARCH 1, 1826.

VOL. XXV.

No. IX.—NEW SERIES.—VOL. II.

PART I. REVIEW.

I.

STATE OF THE SICK POOR.

Protestant Sisters of Charity; a Letter, addressed to the Lord Bishop of London, developing a Plan for improving the Arrangements at present existing for administering Medical Advice, and visiting the Sick Poor. London. KNIGHT. 1826.

Observations on the prevailing Practice of supplying Medical Assistance to the Poor, commonly called The Farming of Parishes; with Suggestions for the Establishment of Parochial Medicine Chests, or Infirmarys in Agricultural Districts. By H. L. SMITH, Member of the Royal College of Surgeons, London; and Surgeon to the Eye and Ear Infirmary, Southam, Warwickshire. London. Printed by the Philanthropic Society. 1819.

IN proportion to the facilities afforded by periodical journals for the dissemination of opinion, is the responsibility of those who conduct such publications for the opinions they so disseminate, and for the industry with which they avail themselves of their frequently returning opportunities of enforcing such as have a tendency to promote the true interests, or to support or improve the character, of the class or profession of persons to which their readers belong. The consciousness of having performed this duty with zeal and probity, and to the best of his ability, is one of the compensations to which an editor should look forward for a life of continual exertion and frequent controversy. This kind of labour, at least, will always appear to him to have been something better than vanity, and its result something better than vexation. Considerations like these, which are surely both just and con-

scientious, make it incumbent upon medical editors in particular, not wholly to confine their labours to selecting and giving publicity to a clinical record of remarkable cases, or to noticing and recording the progressive steps made in the sciences connected with medicine in different countries, or to analysing or reviewing new books of merit—or of none; and we have on several occasions shewn, that we deem it proper and useful from time to time to bring such matters before the medical public as relate to the duties of its members to one another, and to society in general. On subjects of this description, so long as there is freedom of thought, there will be diversity of opinion; but the most opposite parties will seldom refuse to receive liberally such speculations even as they cannot be brought fully to entertain, when they find them emanating from a consistent desire to produce praiseworthy ends.

The publications of which the titles are prefixed to the present article, have re-awakened our attention to a subject of this kind, than which few are in our estimation more important,—a subject which has long been regarded by us as one calling for public animadversion, and embracing the consideration of abuses which seem to have been overlooked amidst the characteristic charity of the times; and which, whilst they are more partaken of than committed by the members of our profession, are caused in a great measure, if not entirely, by the negligence and inconsideration of those who do not belong to it. We speak of the method by which, in almost every part of England, the medical and surgical attendance on the sick poor is provided for, and particularly of what is called *Farming the Sick*. That this subject is beset with difficulties, and surrounded with the thickest vapours of prejudice, affords no admissible pretext for shunning it; and whatever hazard there may be in the attempt to exhibit it in a clear and intelligible manner, we sit down to the attempt as to a duty we have long owed to the character of medical practitioners.

In the able and well-written letter to the Bishop of London, the state of the sick poor of country parishes is clearly and faithfully described, and evidently from what the writer has had sufficient opportunities of observing; and it should alarm the prudence at least of country practitioners, to find that the clergymen about them are as fully acquainted with all the mysteries of farming a parish, and with all the necessary consequences of it too, as the oldest contractor in existence. The principal object of the writer of the *letter* is to propose the establishment in England of a Protestant order of Sisters of Charity—the word Protestant being, we imagine,

used chiefly with a reference to the religion of the majority of persons in England, whom doubtless it would well become, if the plan is found practicable, to be the foremost in promoting it, although the plan itself is such as might be adopted by any sect or persuasion of Christians.

Few of the numerous travellers who have been enabled to visit the continent during the last twelve years, can have failed to notice the dress of an order of nuns, known by the appellation of *Sœurs de Charité*; and whoever has inquired into their life and habits knows that they are a description of persons whose whole time is devoted to charitable labours, and in particular to attending the sick, for whom they perform the most menial, as well as the most important offices. These good women are seen at all hours of the day going about in quest of proper objects of their pious duties. They are persons of a respectable station, sometimes even of a certain *rank*, and have always acquired sufficient information to make them useful without being officious. Happy is he who, when disabled by wounds or sickness, has the advantage of being attended by a *sœur de charité*!

If we reflect for a moment on the general character of the regular *nurse* in this country, we shall find much to deplore, and something to condemn: gossiping, intemperate, selfish, and often negligent of things most important to the sick man's comfort, she has learned to bury all interest in his recovery in a depraved fondness for the dismal festivities in which the common people indulge in the hour of death, and amidst funeral obsequies. It is difficult, indeed, to speak of this class of persons without approaching to that kind of ridicule with which in these pages we can have nothing to do. But when we think of the universal propagation of scandal produced by them, and of their common habits of indulgence in vicious conversation, even in the chamber of sickness; and, on the other hand, reflect on the frame and temper of a sick man's mind; how he is first separated, and gradually weaned, from many worldly feelings by the mere circumstances of his malady; when we observe the effect produced by the very fear of dying, and think how these merciful provisions might be improved, both for the temporal and spiritual advantage of the sufferer; and, considering the opportunities of large hospitals and the great proportion of poor in all towns, how far and wide these 'sweet uses' of temporary suffering *might* be extended among those whose education has been the most neglected, and whose feelings have been the least awakened,—we are struck with the long existing sin of omission, of which we have all been guilty in paying so little

attention to the character and education of persons so important as nurses. The common nurse cannot understand, much less can she avail herself to any good purpose of the salutary workings of the patient's mind: if she is not hardened and profligate, she is probably full of the weakest and worst kind of superstitious fears. A well-regulated piety, the absence of earthly motives, a judicious attention, a cultivated but humble mind, and all those little attentions which, though they make no figure on paper, are all in all to an invalid, make the sister of charity a being so contrasted with her whom we have thus faintly sketched, that she would seem to the eye of sickness like the vision of an angel of light after a dream of the night-mare. The sister of charity does not exaggerate trifling appearances of danger; but she has learnt to know the signs of increasing malady in time to summon abler assistance than her own, both temporal and spiritual: she does not console the weakness of the patient by the private administration of ill-timed stimulants: she does not confirm him in his aversion to taking his medicines: she is, in short, so attentive, so kind, so prudent, so thoughtful, as truly to deserve that most expressive name of sister. What she might be as a meek, simple, pious attendant, we can imagine, but shall not attempt to describe; it is sufficient to say, that she is not to be looked upon as a mere nurse: the proposers of the institution contemplate its being filled by females of a class considerably above that of ordinary nurses, and capable, by means of a better education, of performing duties, sometimes as auxiliaries of the physician, and sometimes of the minister of religion. Let not any one start away from such a proposal because it admits of possible abuses: it has been carried into operation in some countries with the happiest effect; and the important question is, whether or not it can be so in ours?

Of the importance of such subordinate duties being well performed, all medical men will be easily satisfied; and of the usefulness of some such provision as regards an office subordinate to that of the clergyman, in his very essential duty of visiting the sick, the writer of the *letter* leaves no doubt upon our minds. For although this duty is in some measure divided with the clergyman, in most large parishes, by the personal exertions of ladies, who, with minds highly cultivated, and of habits the most refined and delicate, do, from the purest sentiments of a Christian's duty, devote a great portion of their time to visiting the forlorn habitations of the sick poor, of the benefit of which none but the most unreflecting or selfish can harbour a doubt,—yet these exertions

are necessarily less constant and less general than the wants of large and poor parishes require.

‘Such assistance is exceedingly useful as an auxiliary, but there are many reasons why it should not be sufficient to make up the unavoidable deficiency in the clergyman’s attendance. It is not regular—it is not permanent—it is a voluntary duty, and must therefore give way to many others that are imperative, or are considered as such—it is not under control, and may not unfrequently, therefore, be injudiciously administered, without the possibility of a check—it is altogether withdrawn in the most needful cases, where there is fear of infection.’—*Letter*, p. 11.

We of the medical profession, who know what is passing in hospitals, and in the habitations of the poor, at all hours of the day and night, can well conceive the value of attendants to whom these objections would not apply; but the public cannot be supposed fully to understand it. Various difficulties, we are aware, will present themselves in the course of any attempt to establish an order of sisters for this purpose; and it is even doubtful whether our national prejudices may not be found to operate strongly against it; but as, if it should be attempted, medical men will doubtless be called upon to assist in the good work, we extract from the pages of the letter the following account of the *Sœurs de la Charité*:—

‘They consist of women of all ranks of society, many of them having been born in the very highest classes; but who, from various causes, wish to separate themselves from the world, not in the sense in which the phrase applies to other orders of nuns, by surrounding themselves with high walls, but rather in its scriptural sense; while they are impelled by their religious feelings to devote themselves to the benefit of their fellow-creatures. They take vows, and pass a noviciate of a twelvemonth within the convent, and under the immediate inspection of the head of their order. At the end of this twelvemonth, they have the power of withdrawing from their vows, and returning to the world if they desire it. However, it very rarely occurs that a noviciate *sœur de la charité* alters her mind at the end of her probation; and if she continue steady in her intention, she then takes the vows which bind her for life to devote herself actively to the work of charity for the love of God. These nuns have two distinct objects in view; the first is to attend upon the sick, and the second is to educate the poor. They are distributed all over France, and are the principal nurses in the hospitals. They are to be found in every town, and search out the most wretched abodes of disease and want. Others reside in villages, and convey the first rudiments of instruction to the children of the poor. The good that is done by them is incalculable; and the misery which they relieve, by the affectionate sympathy of their attentions, is even greater than that which is removed by their plain sense in

medicine and their excellent nursing. They carry their religion with them wherever their medical usefulness gains them admittance; and the rosary and the crucifix are as important to them as the medicine chest. During a residence in France of some years, though I made many inquiries concerning them, I never heard of one of the order who disgraced her profession by any stain upon her character. There are, I believe, upwards of fifteen hundred of these *sœurs de la charité*, who are ready to attend to every requisition for their services. If a hospital wants a nurse, or a parochial *curé* has need of assistance amongst his flock, application is made to the *Compagnie des Sœurs de la Charité*; and whatever the distance or the difficulty, the charitable sisters set forth at the call. They usually, I believe invariably, are stationed in pairs, which arrangement is made for their own comfort, that in all the distressing and difficult situations in which they may be placed, one may afford assistance, support, and sympathy to the other. They are under the command of the head of the order, who disposes of them in the stations she sees fit, obedience being a part of their vow. The government pays a hundred francs a year to each *sœur de charité* to supply her with clothes, and besides defrays her travelling expenses. If their support cannot be provided from the funds of the hospital, or the parochial resources where their services are required, they are supplied from the general fund of the order; and the active portion of their lives being passed in this labour of love, the period of their decline is rendered comfortable within the precincts of their convent, where even their latest years are beneficially employed in preparing the noviciates for a new course of charitable exertion. They wear a distinguishing dress, of the plainest kind; and they meet with the most universal attention and respect from all classes of people, the high as well as the low, the rich as well as the poor. In travelling about the country from station to station, and in all the situations into which they are thrown, their only, but their sure protection, is the dress of their order; and such is the reverence in which they are held, that even more enlightened persons than the common peasantry hail it as a happy omen, when upon a journey, if a *sœur de charité* happen to travel by the same conveyance; while several instances are recorded, in which the presence of one of them has saved a party of travellers from the attacks of robbers, or the insults of unprincipled men. The surest token of the value of their labours, and perhaps the highest proof that could by possibility be afforded of their acknowledged usefulness, may be drawn from the practical panegyric which was passed on them during the French Revolution. At that period of atheism, anarchy, and horror, when every outward appearance of religion was a sure proscription, and the ready guillotine was the test by which an open profession of faith was put to the proof, a great number of the *sœurs de charité* undauntedly maintained their "faith that worketh by love," and many of them retained the badge of their profession; yet were they rarely molested: their fruits bore the stamp of such evident usefulness, even to the minds

of the monsters possessed with the demon-spirit of the revolution, whose name indeed was Legion,* that they forbore to destroy; and the remembrance of the offices performed by one of these Samaritan sisters in the time of sickness, has stayed the uplifted hand, and quelled the murderous cry of many an infuriated wretch: no doubt that several *sœurs de charité* in various parts suffered, but it is on record, that several were left unharmed while they continued in the exercise of their divine work; and it is certain that they were the only order of persons, connected with religion, who were permitted openly to perform their vows, and discharge their allotted office, in which they were reinstated by the revolutionary government, as soon as the subsiding of the first impulse of anarchy permitted the intervention of any government at all.'—*Letter*, p. 16.

The proposition of the writer of the letter is, that a society of females shall be formed, on a plan having some resemblance to this, modified of course so as to suit the habits and religion of the people; and that their occupation shall be to visit the sick and afflicted, under the direction of the parochial clergy and of medical men; the persons belonging to the order being of known piety, of mature age, and who have had proper preparatory instruction, partly religious, under the superintendence of a chaplain, during a residence under the eye of a matron; and partly medical, during an attendance on some of the public hospitals. It is proposed to effect this plan by means of donations and subscriptions, under royal and distinguished patronage; and the affairs of the institution are to be conducted by a committee of ladies, a general committee, and a medical committee; the chaplain and matron only being stipendiary offices of the charity. Such of the parochial clergy as wish to have assistance of one or more of the sisters are to make an application to the general committee for that purpose; and it is proposed—

'That, previous to making such application, the clergyman shall ascertain what sum he can raise, by subscription in his parish, towards defraying the expense of her support, and what advantages he can otherwise offer her;—that, in stating these particulars to the committee, he shall also state the population and other local circumstances of the parish;—that a comfortable lodging, a convenient cottage, or some proper place of abode, be always required to be found by the clergyman applying;—and that if his other contri-

* We have nothing to do with politics; but really this accumulation of epithets upon men whose faults were indeed great, and their ~~misery~~ dreadful, but yet attributable to the system of ignorance and oppression under which it was their misfortune to be born, and which it was in the first instance the sacred object of the revolution to put an end to, appears to us to be a little *ultra* on the part of the reverend author.

butions towards the expenses be fairly proportioned to the sources from which it is considered that they could properly be drawn, then a sister should be appointed to the situation;—that an arrangement should be made, by which the contributions shall be remitted by the clergyman to the committee, and that the sister shall receive an annuity from the committee, which annuity shall not be regulated by the sum contributed by the parish; but shall be such as, according to the particular advantages of the place, may render her income equal to a stated sum (perhaps £60 a year).—*Letter*, p. 19.

Among the difficulties which may attend carrying this benevolent and useful design into execution, those who engage in it may derive hope from being reminded, 'that when in the year 1625, just two centuries ago, the benevolent Vincent de Paul, surnamed "la père des pauvres," established *La Compagnie des Sœurs de Charité*, he could find but two pious women who would offer themselves. Yet from this small seed has grown a large tree, whose branches spread to the furthest parts of the land, and afford a blessed shelter to many a weary traveller in his difficult pilgrimage upon earth.'—*Letter*, p. 35. We shall not anticipate objections; but there is one which has not only already been foreseen by the proposer, but which it will probably be imagined that medical men in particular will entertain at the very outset; we mean the objection to the sisters having 'a smattering of medical knowledge.' For our own parts, we quite agree with the writer of the letter, that the degree of medical education which the sisters might, under a proper system, be brought to acquire, would be beneficial rather than objectionable. A 'little learning' is said to be a dangerous thing, we know; but if by *learning*, in this oft-repeated phrase, be meant *knowledge*, we must dispute the proposition, for if ever so little knowledge is acquired, provided that knowledge is correct as far as it goes, it must be useful. If a little knowledge is less valuable than more would be, it is surely more valuable than none at all. Quackery is not so often fostered by a little knowledge as by the absence of the very rudiments of a knowledge of physic; and the presumption of quacks is always greater in proportion to their more or less complete ignorance of the fine and complicated mechanism of the body, and the nature of its maladies, and the operation of medicines. No people are more meddling and more mischievous, and at the same time more grossly ignorant, than the common nurses and midwives who now infest the chambers of the sick; and medical practitioners see very frequent instances in which health has been destroyed, and life rendered comfortless, by their rashness, impatience, and invincible obstinacy. Many

of these inconveniences might, we think, be prevented by a better system; at all events, the manual of instructions proposed to be drawn up by a medical committee for the use of the sisters might be made to contain a great deal of useful information. It should clearly define the narrow limits within which unprofessional persons can act, in cases of sickness, with safety; and it should state, in plain and convincing language, the dangers and evils which might be avoided by reporting the case without delay to the physician or surgeon. Such a manual should also contain directions for the application and general management of leeches, the attention necessary when blisters are applied, the method of applying fomentations, and of preparing some of the most simple articles of sick diet; as well as information concerning baths, cold applications, spunging the skin, suppressing hæmorrhages, the management of infants, &c. &c. &c.; concerning many of which subjects nurses and midwives entertain foolish and hurtful prejudices. Still we would not have the *sœurs de charité* think themselves substitutes for the parish surgeon, any more than for the parochial clergyman, since it is impossible they can ever be efficient substitutes for either. If there be any certainty or solidity in the foundations of medical science, a *sœur de charité* can never be made a good and safe practitioner, excepting under the control of a physician or surgeon; and her most valuable knowledge will be found to be, that she knows when it is best not to interfere. We earnestly recommend our readers to peruse the letter to the Bishop of London, in which they will find all the parts of the proposed plan explained with brevity and clearness; but, at the same time, we trust all idea of the plan having the effect of rendering the attendance of surgeons on the parish poor superfluous, will be abandoned, before experience shall have taught its serious inconveniences.

Let it not be imagined for a moment, that we think the present method of providing attendance for the sick poor of parishes as without great defects. That large feature of it, which consists of what is called *farming* the sick poor, is singularly inconsistent with every thing else in this country in the present day; and would not have been so long unreformed by the gentlemen of England, if a great part of its evils had not been unknown to them. The practice is too general to require much explanation. When the overseers of a parish determine that the sick shall be farmed, it is put up to the *lowest* bidder, almost without any limitation as to the distance of bidders from the place in question, or any regard to their comparative respectability. If a surgeon (for physicians have at least nothing to do with *this* means of de-

grading the profession)—if a surgeon of the greatest respectability, residing within five miles of a parish of 2,000 souls, has attended to the pauper sick for £20 a year, and another surgeon, scarcely known in the country, offers to take the parish for £10 a year, the latter has the votes of the overseers unless their former attendant will lower his terms one-half. *Their* business, they conceive, is to save money to the parish, and in this way as well as in any other. The alternative is obvious: either the surgeon who has already had the parish takes it for a sum which he knows will not remunerate him for attending to it, or the new surgeon takes it, and soon finds out the same thing; but he finds, also, that his distance from the parish is an advantage to him: he does not pretend that he can go near it very often, and he cannot very easily be got at: he has made an indifferent bargain, one among many bargains probably (for some individuals carry on very extensive dealings of this kind), and *his* business being to save money for himself, he neglects nothing for that purpose, and only neglects the sick poor. Of the consequences of these arrangements to the country surgeons we cannot speak without concern and indignation. Habitually depreciated by the most ignorant overseers in their neighbourhood; selected for their cheapness; *forced* into neglect of what they feel to be their duty; entangled in vexatious disputes with the overseers and with one another; subject to the most unworthy comments on the contrast afforded by their charges to individuals and to parishes, and to the imputation of overcharges in all the accidental cases which do not come within the contract; we know that almost all surgeons detest this unworthy competition, as no less degrading than subversive of all social and gentlemanly feeling among members of the profession situated as they are. The consequences to the sick paupers are still worse, and such as we could not detail without the risk of exciting very angry feelings; but if there be any reader to whose eye these remarks will be presented, and whose heart or understanding is so perverted as to make him the defender of farming the sick poor, we promise to produce such facts as will make him ashamed of his cause.

The sums expended in public charities in this island exceed calculation and belief; and the regulation of the expenditure of these great funds furnishes occupation to a countless number of persons, who, themselves possessed of all the blessings of this life, voluntarily incur very great labour and trouble, that they may alleviate the distresses of those, whose condition in the world is less fortunate than their own. Even these philanthropic exertions are exceeded by the wide

diffusion and continual operation of that private charity, which sheds so pure a lustre on the character of our country, and carries comfort and consolation into every hamlet in every corner of this populous kingdom. That, notwithstanding so much zeal and judicious generosity, so vast and wide-spreading an evil as the farming of parishes should so long have been either overlooked or viewed with indifference, is to be accounted for partly by the secluded character of the wretchedness which it creates; partly by the delicacy existing among the humane persons who visit the poor, concerning any interference which would seem to reflect on any members of the medical profession; and partly by the difficulty of suggesting a perfect remedy. And thus from year to year has been perpetuated a system, against which every feeling and sympathy of our nature rises up in arms. We daily see that rank, fortune, prosperity, the attentions of friends, and all the consolations of wealth, and all the resources of a cultivated and disciplined mind, are unable in the hour of sickness to render men independent of the mere professional skill which they can command, or even of the soothing or agitating influence of the manners of their professional attendant. In no other circumstances is the human soul so weak and so anxious for support. The feelings of the lower orders of society are less acute, but precisely of the same kind; for sickness does indeed most truly begin 'that equality which death completes.' Their occupations are suspended, their coarse and scanty pleasures are interrupted, their humble prospects are clouded, and all their hopes rest on the kindness, and attention, and skill of the physician or surgeon. But it is precisely at this time that, by the parish system, they are made to experience the worst disadvantages of their station, and are subjected to an arrangement, by which their health and feelings are made as much the subject of an interested bargain as if they had been actually bought and sold in the slave-market. Therefore it is that they so often neglect to apply to the parish surgeon until it is too late, and linger on from day to day in pains, in privations, in sickness of body, and that sickness of the heart which arises from hopes, not deferred but destroyed; and, considering themselves destitute outcasts, begin to feel that discontent with man and God which it is always found so difficult to eradicate; and, even if they regain their health, lose in many instances all the qualities which made them respectable and useful.

It is far from our intention to throw measureless blame on the surgeons and apothecaries: we know too well how unjust it would be so greatly to misrepresent the feelings with which they find themselves compelled, when they first

establish themselves in country towns, to compete for parishes : nor is there any thing we should more lament, than an appearance of advancing a charge of deliberate inhumanity against any members of a profession to which we are no less attached by choice than by circumstance—a profession which calls for the full exertion of the mind in pursuits of the highest interest, for practical purposes of the noblest kind ; and the followers of which have ever been distinguished, as a body, for an enlightened attachment to learning and to every branch of science, and for the habitual exercise of duties which are often most laborious to themselves—always most beneficial to mankind, and performed in daily and innumerable instances without any hope or expectation of reward beyond the consciousness of doing good.

An expensive education ; the necessity of keeping up a respectable appearance ; the number of competitors for public confidence ; the slow growth of that confidence ; even the gradual increase of engagements, harassing both to body and mind,—are all circumstances which cause the young surgeon to accept, and the old surgeon to retain a hold, real or imaginary, on nominal districts of country ; and it is generally thought that to have the poor of a parish is a step to having the rich. ‘ The parish doctor is often seen in the village, is ready at the call of the farmers, shopkeepers, and those who are able to pay for themselves ; and the medical man who farms the parish is thereby introduced into a considerable extent of village business, which constitutes a large portion of the income of most country practitioners.’* It is the latter circumstance which, in our view of the matter, is more detrimental to the country practitioners than any other : they are tempted in early practice to take parishes very cheap, on speculation ; and in these enterprises the least respectable man in the neighbourhood has a great advantage : the more imperfect his education has been, the cheaper can he do the parish work ; and not that work only, but the whole business of a country practitioner. Then comes the worst effect of all, as far as medical men are concerned—for country people think more of the cheapness of an apothecary’s drugs than of his learning—and the cheap doctor gets all the business ; and in this way the whole rate of apothecaries’ charges has, as we know from actual observation, become in some parts of the country so much below what it ought to be, that the general practitioner, though full of engagements, barely gets a livelihood, and can make no provision for his family. We think it is in the power of the country surgeons and apothecaries

* Letter to the Bishop of London.—P. 5.

to take higher ground, and to set a higher price on their time, their talents, and their labour. In our profession, talents can never be exercised at once gratuitously, and for the advantage of the whole body of the public, for any length of time: no man of real talent would steadily submit to the fatigue of medical and surgical practice without that pecuniary remuneration which is to procure him comforts, or independence, or luxuries, or the means of intellectual gratification. But too many parish surgeons may be said to work for *next to nothing*; and we lament to feel convinced, that a conscientious parish surgeon, who does all that he knows to be his duty to his parish, must, according to the present system, be both hard-worked and ill-paid. Where can be the necessity for this? Are medical men so sunk as to be at the mercy of parish overseers? Are science, and skill, and attention of so little worth, that it has become a matter of favour to be allowed to exert them? By no means. But the overseers of country parishes, however upright they may be as individuals, partake a little of the narrow spirit of all corporate functionaries; they are generally of a class of persons who estimate the value of an apothecary's attendance by the weight and measure of medicine furnished; they firmly believe that 'a penny saved is a penny got;' and as they find that some apothecary or other, near or distant, will take their parish for as small a sum as can possibly make a decent item on paper, they think the parish must be benefited by the bargain. They do not easily comprehend that the above famous axiom of prudence is only true in certain circumstances; and that if a man is neglected in an illness in the prime of life, because his parish surgeon lives at a distance, and is not properly paid for seeing him, and thus becomes more or less burdensome to the parish for the long remainder of his existence, the penny saved by the first neglect is *not* a penny got, but many hundred pennies lost to the parish.

The sentiments of the best educated surgeons throughout the country being, as we have represented them, so averse to the continuance of the system of farming parishes, it might be supposed that any attempt to put an end to it would be favourably received by them. An allusion is made by the writer of the 'Letter to the Bishop of London,'* to the only persevering attempt of this kind with which we are acquainted; and the nature of this attempt is fully developed in the pamphlet, of which we have also placed the title at the head of this article. Mr. Smith's proposals have not, however,

* See Letter.—P. 8.

met with an uniformly favourable reception from medical men, and we must ourselves plead guilty to having for some time very much misunderstood them; particularly with respect to that part of them which comprehends a scheme for receiving subscriptions from persons *not paupers*, such subscribers being to be visited in illness, and to have medicine at the expense of the general fund; in short, a kind of Saving Bank against Sickness. But on duly considering this subject, both parts of the plan appear to us to tend to the same end. The pauper list is greatly increased every year by those who first become paupers on account of some transient sickness; and if these persons could be supported through the sickness, they might often be prevented becoming paupers at all. After once becoming paupers, it is to be feared they generally contrive to remain more or less burdensome to the parish: if they can not only be prevented becoming paupers, but prevented by what they have themselves previously saved and subscribed, or deposited, a great benefit is done to them, and to the public at the same time. It is easy to see on what the repugnance of practitioners towards this plan is founded, and we shall, notice that point presently; but in fairness to Mr. Smith, and for the general information of the profession, we shall in this place give insertion to his plan of a District Infirmary:—

‘ I. That a General Infirmary and Dispensary be established at _____, open for all the labouring poor, who are resident within six or seven miles of that place.

‘ II. That it be supported by voluntary contributions, and by individual and parochial subscriptions; the latter after the rate of £3 per annum, for every hundred of inhabitants in all villages situated within three miles, and £4 per annum for every hundred in all villages beyond that distance.

‘ III. That mechanics, servants, and labourers, who are not strictly denominated poor, and who may be desirous of availing themselves of the advantages of this institution, be allowed to do so, on contributing annually 5s. each.

‘ IV. That every female subscriber of 5s. shall be entitled to medical attendance.

‘ V. The subscriptions for children under the age of fifteen to be 2s. 6d. each per annum.

‘ VI. That subscribers of one guinea per annum may recommend two patients (cases of midwifery excepted).

‘ VII. That annual subscribers of one guinea shall annually elect a committee of twenty from among themselves, who, with the overseers of the subscribing parishes, forming part of the committee, shall have the direction of the establishment.

‘ VIII. That Messrs. A. B. C. be appointed surgeons to the insti-

tution, and any, or every regular medical practitioner, residing in the district, be admitted into the establishment, at the discretion of the committee.

‘ IX. That Mr. A. be appointed to attend every Monday and Thursday, from ten to eleven. That Mr. B. on Tuesday and Friday. That Mr. C. on Wednesday and Saturday.

‘ X. That 2*s.* 6*d.* be allowed for every journey within three miles of the Infirmary, and for every additional visit in the same place 1*s.*, and for every additional mile beyond that distance 9*d.*, or

That after the expenses of the medicines, and all other demands on the funds, are paid, £50 (for the current expenses of the institution) be then kept in the treasurer’s hands, the remainder to be divided between the surgeons, in proportion to the number of miles travelled and visits made; and each surgeon shall deliver in a monthly account of his journeys and visits to the secretary, from which his allowance shall be calculated.

‘ X. That the poor shall have the privilege of being attended at home, by such one of the surgeons as they may desire, upon sending an order signed by the minister of the parish, or the overseers.

‘ XII. That the poor of subscribing parishes, who may be able to attend at the infirmary, upon observing the appointed hours, and producing evidence of their belonging to such a parish, require no other recommendation.

‘ XIII. That all medicine be purchased by the surgeons, under the direction of the committee. The surgeons to find their own instruments, except trusses.

‘ XIV. That lodgings and accommodations, for patients requiring frequent attendance, be procured at the expense of the funds, provided they have no accommodation for sick in the house.

‘ XV. Paupers not being maintained out of the funds of the institution, must, therefore, if in lodgings, be supplied immediately from their parish; and if in the infirmary, will be provided for by the housekeeper for 5*s.* 6*d.* each per week, and if under ten years of age 3*s.* 6*d.*—Her accounts are separate from the funds, but regularly investigated by the committee.

‘ XVI. That under unavoidable circumstances, that may require the absence of the surgeon officiating, he shall provide a substitute.

‘ XVII. That no important operation in the infirmary be performed without the attendance of two surgeons. The operating surgeon only shall be allowed to introduce visitors to an operation.

‘ XVIII. That the committee (five constituting a majority) meet on the first Monday in every month.

‘ XIX. That a treasurer and secretary be appointed, the latter with a salary.

‘ XX. That in extreme cases the surgeon, if he thinks it expedient, do call in the aid of such neighbouring physician as he may think proper, whose fees shall be paid out of the funds.

‘ XXI. That notice of the physician’s attendance be communicated to the surgeons of the infirmary by the surgeon who solicits his attendance.

‘ XXII. That when the usual midwife is obliged to call in the assistance of an infirmary surgeon to the female poor in labour, such surgeon shall be entitled to one guinea for his attendance, from the funds.

‘ XXIII. That no female poor be entitled to medical attendance when in labour, on account of the establishment, but as above.

‘ XXIV. That the names of the surgeons, with their days and hours of attendance, be fixed in the common room.

‘ XXV. That patients desiring a consultation of the surgeons, do, with the consent of two overseers or governor, send the secretary an intimation of their wish to that effect.

‘ XXVI. That the poor find their own bottles, phials, and bandages, and come supplied with them after the first visit.

‘ XXVII. That any complaint of inattention, or neglect, of the nurse, secretary, or surgeon, be directly stated to a subscriber, who, after investigating its truth, will report it to the committee.

‘ XXVIII. That wine, sago, porter, &c., be ordered for the patients by the surgeon only, and kept by the nurse, who shall deliver in a monthly account of what has been thus expended.

‘ XXIX. That every patient admitted into the house do conform to the rules thereof, or be discharged, and a report of the cause of his dismissal be made to the party who recommended him.’—Pp.13—16.

Of all the parts of the above plan, that which we believe has weighed, and weighs, most strongly against its obtaining even a patient inspection, is what relates to those who may be called the benefited subscribers: it has been conceived, that the effect of affording such an opportunity as this to the lower classes would be, that many would avail themselves of it who could afford to pay the apothecary. We should look upon this as a very serious objection indeed. Between the paupers, however, and those of the labourers *who pay*, as well as *employ*, the apothecary, there is (as many an apothecary's book could tell) a very considerable class of persons who are burdensome to him as long as they can, and then become at once, and for ever, burdensome to the parish. Now we conceive a well-regulated district infirmary, or dispensary, would prevent both these inconveniences. Too great care could not be taken to prevent the intrusion of persons in better circumstances; for nothing strikes more directly at the root of industry than indiscriminate eleemosynary aid of any kind: and if any means could be devised by which this point would be made *secure*, we believe the objections of many who now feel jealous of the plan would be wholly removed. It would thus become a part of that well-devised system of charity which draws a judicious distinction between *assisting* and *mere giving*, and which effectually provides for the relief and help of the most industrious and deserving, because it exacts some portion of exertion as a title to its benefits.

A single perusal of Mr. Smith's plan will shew that it possesses these advantages :—1. The sick person is able to choose his attendant, a most desirable and proper privilege. 2. The medical men who reside near each other can readily consult together concerning difficult cases ; the result of which will be, that no case will be allowed to get worse from neglect, whilst the general spirit of practitioners will be kept up. 3. The poor, who have often even an unjust want of confidence both in the parish surgeon and his powders and potions,* would think very differently of medicine thus supplied to them, and in some instances would obtain medicines which no parish surgeon could be expected to supply them with under his contract ; they would also be more regularly, because more easily, attended to. 4. Each parish would pay a just sum for the professional attendance required by its poor. In short, among many minor improvements, the following, which are all-important, would be secured :—The poorest person in the poorest parish would not be neglected ; the apothecary attending him would be properly paid ; the parishes, whilst they paid what was right, would not be liable to extortion : and these points ought to recommend it as much to the country surgeons as to all the parties interested.

It should be added, that Mr. Smith has not wholly trusted to speculation, or limited his exertions to making specious proposals. When the plan above described had been laid before the public some years, he determined on endeavouring to put it to trial, under his own inspection, and that of a committee, to be chosen out of those who should attend a meeting summoned for the purpose. Such a meeting was held at Southam, about three years ago, and most respectably attended. In the list of names of the committee then appointed, we find several of the most opulent and influential of the country gentlemen of the county of Warwick, with whose sanction a District Dispensary was established, and has now been nearly three years in operation. The result has recently been given in a Report from the committee, and appears to be very favourable, although hitherto the institution has had to contend with the disadvantages of its novelty, and of being not fully understood. We trust Mr. Smith will persevere in this experiment, the result of which is observed with no inattentive eye by those whose power of drawing public attention to it is far greater than our own ; by men in whom great influence is

* Mr. Smith observes, ' This is almost the only instance of independent spirit the poor laws have not destroyed.' We fear this is too true : and the great recommendation of the reform we are advocating is, that it would tend to encourage, or rather to revive, the independent exertion of those who now look upon the parish as an ' inheritance.'

happily combined with the most enlarged philanthropy. For ourselves, we confess that we watch the plan with interest chiefly with reference to the *parish* system, of which we cherish a hope that it will eventually effect the downfall: but the change included in that downfall is so great, the evil complained of is so general, and so hallowed by that long custom, which always confounds right and wrong, that our present hopes are limited to the perseverance of the proposer, until such statements can be made in the proper place as will ensure the interference of Parliament. We may be mistaken, but we scarcely hope to see a complete stop put to the system of farming the sick poor until the practice is declared illegal.

There is one circumstance connected with the District Dispensary already said to have been established, which, although its being mentioned here is not very important, might yet, if omitted, be supposed to be so left out from an improper motive. We will not conceal, therefore, however we may lament the fact, that many of the country gentlemen who entered very warmly into the plan at first, have, without professing to have changed their opinion, thought themselves not justified in taking any further active part in a matter which some of the country practitioners have represented to them in the light of an unjust and even cruel interference. The considerateness which forms part of the character of those who know all the interests and all the wants of the country, has been practised upon by these remonstrances to an extent which threatens to obstruct all improvement,—as if the parish system were a thing so pure and holy that it could not be touched without a kind of sacrilege. But this delusion cannot last long. The representations were sincere enough, no doubt, but they were founded on misapprehension; at least we should be sorry to entertain any other supposition.

We do not expect in these days to arouse any excessive spirit of jealousy in those physicians and surgeons who hold appointments in public hospitals, if, as connected with this subject, we express our opinions on these institutions without reserve. Every day convinces us more and more of the incalculable benefits accruing to the public from hospitals, dispensaries, lying-in charities, and all establishments, under whatever name known, of which the objects are similar. Without institutions of this kind, the condition of the poor, in countries which are called civilised, would be that of savages, without their independence. Wherever we find poor families, to whom the benefits of these institutions do not come in any shape, there we find wretchedness in all its forms: the children dirty and diseased; and the older people suffering daily and hourly from neglect in some past sickness. All these chair-

ties bring the poor out of the rude hands of those just above them, and place them within the notice of those of more elevated station, of more enlightened minds, and better cultivated feelings. The institution of hospitals, in which the sick poor could have the best advice and the most kind attentions of every kind, was perhaps one of the greatest of the many civil blessings which followed the establishment of the pure religion of Christ. When they were first established, and for a considerable time afterwards, the population of this kingdom was thin and scattered, the wealth of the provinces very inconsiderable, and the means of education difficult of access; hospitals were necessarily fixed where large communities were collected, and where talent of every kind was most surely to be found, engaged in the pursuit of wealth; and as large towns were not numerous, each hospital was intended to ensure the advantages of professional skill to a wide district, of which it was the centre. But every thing is changed in England. Towns are more numerous, the provinces more populous and wealthy, the means of medical education within every man's reach; and talents and information, which a century ago would have challenged attention in the capital, may now be found contending for success in all the towns, and in many of the villages, of this highly cultivated country. Do not all these circumstances together render the ancient constitution of hospitals rather inconvenient? Would they not be more useful if smaller and more numerous? Whoever has resided in a part of the country remote from the 'county hospital,' or in counties where there is no hospital, can have little doubt how to answer these questions. We are content to leave them open to free discussion: we have no object in view but the diffusion of as much good as possible to as many individuals as possible, without any approach to extravagance; and he who suggests the best method of effecting these ends shall always have our thanks and our support.

The plans thus noticed, and more particularly that of Mr. Smith, are presented to our readers, not as out of the reach of objection, not as meeting every difficulty, but as truly worthy of grave and deliberate examination. Let the defects be pointed out; let the propositions be amended; but, at all events, let medical practitioners try to reform a system which is prejudicial to their interests, and to their estimation in society. We will speak openly;—we wish professional men to be active in promoting a reform which will do them honour, and which, if they neglect it now, will by and by be effected without them. Many particulars indicative of the necessity of this might be added, for we have merely opened the subject, but they are all pretty well known to medical men, and

we trust we have said enough to attract attention to them: the rest we leave to the good feeling of medical practitioners; and we will, for our own parts, afford every opportunity for free discussion on a question on which the highest abilities might not unworthily be employed.

As for the author of the plan last noticed by us, we should be sorry to prejudice any of our readers against him, unknown as he must be to many of them, by what might appear injudicious and partial praise; but if it be in the nature of things that the most disinterested exertions for the good of a very large portion of the least fortunate inhabitants of a flourishing and charitable land—exertions steadily pursued, for many years, against many difficulties—at great expense—with much labour—with frequent disappointments—through ‘good report and evil report’—with the utmost openness, and the fullest desire to explain every part of the object proposed, and to listen to all suggestions, from all persons, and on all proper occasions—should at last succeed, we shall look forward to Mr. Smith’s receiving his reward, at no very distant day, in the approbation of all parties, not in his own neighbourhood only, but generally throughout the kingdom; and in the still more gratifying consciousness of having had it in his power to do more than it often falls to the lot of an individual to perform for those who are abandoned to every variety of suffering and neglect. But should such a reward never be attained by him, we exhort him to remember, that the merits of endeavours like his are in no degree dependent on their success.
