

Sick paupers and their medical attendants : an exposé of the fraud inflicted on the sick poor, and the ratepayer, in the employment by poor-law medical officers of unqualified assistants / by C.H.

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SICK PAUPERS

AND THEIR

MEDICAL ATTENDANTS.

AN EXPOSÉ OF THE FRAUD INFLICTED ON THE SICK POOR,
AND THE RATEPAYER, IN THE EMPLOYMENT BY POOR-LAW
MEDICAL OFFICERS OF UNQUALIFIED ASSISTANTS.

“The indifferent manner in which Medical Officers interpret the Orders of The Local Government Board, and, together with Relieving Officers, ignore regulations, in order that the work may be made easy to both, has a tendency to demoralize them, and is certainly an injustice to the Poor.”—Letter of Clerk to the Guardians of the — Union.

“Our national Poor-Law system, in spite of inherent defects of organization and detail, affords legitimate ground for national pride. The System, however, involves responsibilities, which, as they are unavoidable, it is desirable, and even necessary, should be kept in public view.”—Lancet, August 24th, 1878.

BY C. H.

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1878.

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SICK PAUPERS

AND THEIR

MEDICAL ATTENDANTS.

INTRODUCTION.

THE systematic evasion of duty by many—we had almost said a majority—of Poor-Law Medical Officers, has for a long time past excited feelings of indignation in the breasts of their more conscientious brethren, who, although they whine, and cry for help, one to another, yet hesitate individually, to bring charges of misbehaviour affecting another of their own order under the notice of the Local Government Board, and demand his censure; thus the grievance has hitherto run its course unchecked, and the evil-doers have remained unadmonished.

The frauds committed on the Sick Pauper, and the Ratepayer, have, however, at last excited the attention of the public, outside the profession, and in June, 1877, the following observations from a correspondent appeared in *The English Labourers' Chronicle*:—"The recent case of starvation of an idiot in the Isle of Wight Workhouse, has aroused attention to the manner in which the administration of the Poor-Law is supervised, and when we see *The Lancet*, which is the recognised organ of the medical profession, protesting against the nature of the medical attendance given to Sick Paupers, we may feel sure that the state of things is very bad indeed."

Some complaint as to the attention—or, too often, want of attention—which the Sick Paupers have given to them, appears in almost every published report of proceedings of Boards of Guardians; and we would commend as worthy general notice, an amusing—albeit somewhat whimsical—work recently published, entitled, *Medical Men and Manners*, in which "Doctors, and Doctor's-Doctor's Assistants," are subjected to cruciation by an unsparing hand.

It will be well for us, perhaps, to attempt to ascertain the views of the higher ranks of the Medical Profession in regard to the working of the Poor-Law Medical Service, before entering into details, and it is here necessary to premise, for the information of non-medical readers, that *The General Medical Council of Education for Great Britain and Ireland*, may be fairly likened in its relations with the Medical Profession, to the House of Peers with the community.

At a Meeting of the General Medical Council, held in April, 1878, Dr. Acland, F.R.S., in the chair, the following proposition was moved by Sir Dominic Corrigan, and carried:—

“That while the Council cannot undertake the duty of prosecuting unqualified practitioners, they nevertheless think it their duty to call the attention of the *Local Government Board of England*, to a practice which it appears exists in England, of practitioners in charge of Medical Relief Districts, of employing Unqualified Assistants to act for them in the treatment of medical and midwifery cases, tending to the detriment of the public, and other evils; and they would suggest to the Local Government Board of England, the consideration of the rule in Ireland, that no Medical Officer in charge of a Dispensary District is permitted to have a substitute, unless for a limited time, and unless such substitute is fully qualified to the satisfaction of the Dispensary Board, and with the sanction of the Local Government Board.”

The *Medical Officer of Health* of one of the largest towns on the South Coast, writes to us as follows:—

“My opinion is that the practice of Unqualified Assistants undertaking the general care of a pauper in an illness, the principal seeing the patient once, or so, during the illness, is one that should not be allowed.”

The letter which we now quote at length, appeared in *The Lancet* about a year since, and treats the subject we are considering as one affecting the status of the profession generally:—

“POOR-LAW MEDICAL WORK.

To the Editor of The Lancet.

“SIR,—The insufficient pay complained of by your correspondent, F. A. B., is amongst the least of the grievances of which those Poor-Law Officers who conscientiously perform their duty have to complain; it is useless to blink the fact, that the acceptance does lower the social and professional position of the holder if he performs the duties *personally*, and it must necessarily be so as long as Poor-Law Inspectors, and Poor-Law Guardians, are indifferent as to whether Sick Paupers are attended by the principal or by an Unqualified Assistant.

"I believe the time has arrived for putting an end to this baleful practice, and it appears to me, that as a measure of self-protection, we ought to call the attention of the authorities to cases where our neighbours injure the status of ourselves and the whole profession, by pursuing a course, which is in direct defiance of the orders, and regulations which they have undertaken to observe.

"I am, Sir,

"Yours faithfully,

"August, 1877."

"AN EX-POOR-LAW MEDICAL OFFICER.

At a Meeting of the General Medical Council, held June 28th, 1878, Sir Dominic Corrigan, *inter alia*, observed:—

"There was one point on which the Council might have reported with advantage, namely,—the employment of unqualified assistants in England. One could not take up a single number of *The Lancet* without seeing numerous advertisements from unqualified assistants. Such advertisements did not state that the applicant was acquainted with the profession, but that he could "ride and drive well," that being considered a sufficient recommendation."*

In order that we may be free from any imputation of partiality in the choice of the paragraphs we have selected, we will now attempt to ascertain the opinions entertained by Medical Officers themselves, in relation to this question.

At a Meeting of the Poor-Law Medical Officers' Association,† held July 3rd, 1877, Chairman,—Dr. Joseph Rogers:—

"THE CHAIRMAN,—There is no question that we are not a popular body, either with the Guardians, the Local Government Board, or the public. Neither entertain any regard for us."

We are also enabled to give an extract from a letter recently received by us from a gentleman who has given a great amount of consideration to the interests of Poor-Law Medical Officers, without losing sight of the necessity of ensuring efficient attendance on the sick pauper:—

"I entirely agree with you as to the unfairness implied in the existing system, whereby unqualified assistants are employed to do the work of Poor-Law Medical Officers, and I can speak with some degree of authority, as I was for ten years the Medical Officer of the ——— Union Workhouse, during which I had to keep, and pay for, qualified assistance. I have also been for some years Medical Officer to the ——— Union Workhouse, and have had to employ a qualified assistant. My out-

* See Appendix.

† See Appendix.

door colleagues send their *Unqualified* Assistants to do the parish work, without question asked, as my out-door colleagues did in days gone by."——

"Cases are quite common where Parochial Medical Officers keep Unqualified Assistants."

"The Local Government Board (and the Poor-Law Board before them), *pretend* to compel the Medical attendance on the Poor, to be given by qualified men; they direct that every Medical Man upon his election as Medical Officer to the Guardians, shall appoint a legally qualified Medical Man to act as his deputy, in illnesses where he cannot himself personally attend. Where this Rule is departed from, the fault lies: first—with the Clerk* of the Guardians; secondly—with the Guardians themselves."——
Letter of a Poor-Law Medical Officer.

It is with much reluctance that we have deemed it imperative to introduce the word "Fraud" into our Title Page, and we for a long time hesitated to do so; but we have failed to find another word approaching to an equivalent, or to define the difference between the person who, contracting with a Board of Guardians to give, personally†, skilled Medical treatment to sick and aged sufferers, foists another and inferior thing on them; and the Baker who falls short of his undertaking by supplying a light loaf.

"The practice of Poor-Law Surgeons leaving the attendance on the Sick to Unqualified Assistants is not only a breach of contract, for which they are liable to dismissal, but is a fraud ‡

* See Appendix.

† Every Officer shall perform his duties in person, and shall not intrust the same to a Deputy, except with the official permission of the Commissioners, on the application of the Guardians.—*Order of Poor-Law Board.*
[C. H.]

Every Medical Officer shall be bound to visit, and attend personally, as far as may be practicable, the poor persons intrusted to his care, and shall be responsible for the attendance on them.—*Order of the Poor-Law Board.*
[C. H.]

‡ Section 98 of the Poor-Law Act enacts:—"That in case any person shall wilfully neglect, or disobey any of the rules, orders, or regulations, of the said Commissioners (Local Government Board), such person shall, upon conviction, forfeit and pay for the first offence, any sum not exceeding five pounds; for the second offence, any sum not exceeding twenty pounds, nor less than five pounds; and in the event of such person being convicted a third time, such third and every subsequent offence shall be deemed a misdemeanour, and such offender shall be liable to be indicted for the same offence, and shall, on conviction, pay such fine, not being less than twenty pounds, and suffer such imprisonment, with or without hard labour, as may be awarded against him." [C. H.]

both on the Patient and the Ratepayer, because it may reasonably be assumed that recovery would take place more quickly under skilled advice, than with hap-hazard treatment, and that work would be resumed and Parish allowance cease in many cases some weeks earlier than it now does."

"So much importance does the Local Government Board attach to this question, that they do not permit Medical Officers to depute their duties to assistants, whether qualified* or not; yet such is the laxity of duty on the part of the Local Government Inspectors, that they allow—as happens in a case within my own knowledge—a Medical man to hold his appointment, although he has not performed any part of his duties for some years."—*Correspondent of English Labourers' Chronicle.*

"When it is considered that anxiety, deprivation, and ruin fall on the poor man, and heavy charges fall on the Rates, where long continued illness occurs, it is difficult to understand how Guardians can shut their eyes to the wrong doings of their Officers. In the case of Farmers, they may be deterred from interference by the higher social position of the Doctors, or even in some cases by their having no receipts for their last year's bill; but the Clergy are well represented at most Boards of Guardians, and no such influences can exist in their case; yet if any Board of Guardians allowed their Chaplain, to depute his duties to a person who had not been ordained, they would raise one universal howl from Land's End to John O'Groats."—*Correspondent of English Labourers' Chronicle.*

If, as sometimes happens, a member of that community which styles itself a "Peculiar People," loses a child by disease, without having obtained skilled medical assistance—that is, the attendance of a legally qualified Medical Practitioner—he is deemed to have committed an offence punishable by law, and is compelled to undergo a trial before a jury; when, if he has the good fortune to escape an adverse verdict, and a long term of imprisonment, he is seriously admonished by the Judge, and told that his plea of having done all that to him seemed best for the restoration to health of his deceased offspring, is insufficient, and that it was his duty to call for the aid of an

* "The Board do not permit Medical Officers appointed under their regulations to depute their duties to Assistants, whether qualified or not."—*Letter of Local Government Board.*—[C.H.]

"Every District, and Workhouse, Medical Officer, under the Local Government Board, has a deputy (substitute?) duly appointed. He alone is recognised by the Board, and Unqualified Assistants cannot be legally employed."—*Lancet, 4th May, 1878.*—[C.H.]

expert in medical science, and adopt the treatment advised by him.

The offence unwittingly committed by this poor man is, however, far less criminal than that of the Poor-Law Medical Officer, who, availing himself of the ignorance of the poor, the indifference of the Guardians, and the connivance of the Relieving Officer,* thrusts on the sick paupers committed to his care the attendance of an Unqualified Assistant, not seldom an individual aptly described to us by a member of the profession well acquainted with the subject, as "a lad of about twenty-two years of age." This individual may or may not have medical knowledge; he may be a gentleman, or he may be a drudge, little better educated than a groom, and who is said by one of his own order in a communication to *The Lancet* to be frequently known to the patients as "the Cove who opens the door;" yet we know this practice is pursued by numberless individuals, who disregard the conditions of the agreement they have entered into, and treat the Local Government Board, its orders, and regulations, with contempt.†

A Poor Law Conference of the South Midland District was held at Oxford a few months since, at which sixty-four Unions were represented, and the attendance of the rural clergy was very considerable. After a discussion on Education, a Paper was read by Mr. Austin, of Luton, on "Pauperism," in which the steady, persistent, and unflinching administration of the law was advocated. This was followed by a long debate, principally pointing to the discontinuance of Out-door Relief as the remedy for existing evils, one of the speakers (Rev. W. Bury) observing that "he should be inclined to do away with Out-door Relief, and also Medical Relief." This, with other speeches made on the occasion, brought forth the following article in one of the leading newspapers published in that city:

"If a foreigner should visit us with a view to learn our method of dealing with the pauper population of the country, he would probably be powerfully impressed by the admirable arrangements provided for dealing with the aged and sick; he would find that one of the fundamental duties of a Board of Guardians is to divide their Union into districts of a convenient size, and to appoint a Medical Officer to each, whose duty shall

* See Appendix.

† See penalty for this offence in previous note.—[C. H.]

be to attend personally,* except in case of unavoidable absence, on every person who shall have obtained an order from the Relieving Officer, and on the aged, and infirm, who are permanently in the receipt of parochial relief; and the Local Government Board do not permit Medical Officers appointed under their regulations to depute their duties to Assistants, whether qualified or not.†

“The appointment being made, must be submitted for confirmation to the Local Government Board, who require that the Officer should possess registered Medical *and* Surgical qualifications, and that he shall reside within the district; these requirements being complied with, the appointment is permanent, and the Officer is so far free from any prejudice, or caprice of the Guardians, as to be irremovable, except with the assent of the Local Government Board, half his salary being paid out of the Consolidated Fund.

“The Medical Officer is further required under their order to appoint a substitute, also legally qualified, to assist him in his emergencies, and to submit to the Guardians a book, or sheet, called ‘The Weekly Medical Return,’ in which all visits made by any other person than himself shall be marked in *red ink*, and an account entered of the Meat, Wine, &c., ordered for the Sick.

“It is the duty of the Relieving Officer to visit from time to time all sick paupers; to afford them the relief ordered by the Guardians; and also the extra nourishment ordered by the Medical Officer, unless he is prepared with good and sufficient reasons for his disobedience; and there is no doubt that he is bound to inform the Guardians, of any case coming within his knowledge, where the orders and regulations of the London Board are not observed.

“We have also a body of highly-paid gentlemen, styled Inspectors, whose duty it is to visit the Unions, call the attention of the Guardians to their shortcomings, and to report to their chiefs any cases of persistent non-compliance with the law.

“We will now look at the other side of the picture, and see how this elaborate piece of machinery is put into action.

“First: We find that the Medical districts are so arranged as to inflict great hardship on the pauper, and great inconvenience

* “It is quite true that the regulations requiring the personal discharge of his duties by a District Medical Officer, in all cases in which he is not prevented by absence from home, or other hindrance, are very frequently disregarded.”—*Letter of Local Government Inspector.*—[C. H.]

† See note ante.—[C. H.]

to their doctor, the sick having in some cases to travel a distance of five or six miles, when there are two, or perhaps more, Medical Officers of the same Union residing within less than one.

“Next: We shall find Relieving Officers systematically refusing to notice the Medical Officer’s orders for extra nourishment, thus rendering any strictly Medical treatment nugatory, and too often making him indifferent in the exercise of his office; but the greatest scandal is the practice now so generally existing amongst Poor-Law Medical Officers, of deputing their services to Unqualified Assistants, in face of their contract, and in direct defiance of the law,* and of the bodies defining their duties.

“How it happens that Inspectors† overlook this, and fail to ascertain, as they would by inquiry, that the greater number of the sick poor receive no Medical attendance whatever, in the proper sense of the word, is difficult to discover; but there is no difficulty in realising the demoralisation produced on the Medical and Relieving Officers, and the Pauper, by permitting the practice to continue.”—*Oxford Times*.

In almost every town there is an individual known as a “Prescribing Chemist,” who has in most instances been the Unqualified Assistant of the Local Poor-Law Medical Officer, and has had almost entirely in his charge, the sick poor of the district. No sooner is he dismissed, probably from some irregularity of conduct which prevents his obtaining another situation, than his late employer, “hoist on his own Petard,” loudly proclaims that his deposed *Factotum* is not qualified to treat cases of illness. As time goes on, he is first surprised, and next indignant, at finding many of his patients do not heed his assertions, and fail to perceive that a man may be incompetent when acting on his own behalf, although he had competence to act for, and materially add to, the gains of another.

* See note ante.—[C. H.]

† “One of the first and most important duties of a Board of Guardians is to appoint Medical Officers to the several districts of the Union, these appointments being subject to the approval of the Local Government Board, who have issued orders as to the legal qualifications they should possess. The Local Government Board have also issued regulations as to the manner in which Medical Officers should perform their duties, and keep a book called ‘The Weekly Medical Return;’ but no steps are taken by Poor-Law Inspectors to ascertain if these regulations are observed.”—*Correspondent of English Labourers’ Chronicle*.

To meet these cases we have *Medical Defence* and *Medical Alliance* associations; but so long as they prosecute (persecute?) Druggists, and Quacks, and allow Medical Men,—even their own members—to delegate their duties in Poor-Law appointments and clubs to Unqualified Assistants, they will be regarded as Trades' Unions; their *bonâ fides* will be questioned, and their victims will become objects of sympathy. An illustration of the action of these bodies is shown in the following case, for it must be understood that the Apothecaries' Society does not exercise its powers, but allows them to be used by others.

“On March 21st an action was with partial success taken by the Apothecaries' Society against Thomas Johnson, of Knottingley, for the recovery of £20, on account of his having practised as an Apothecary without being legally qualified and certificated.

“The jury gave a mitigated penalty of £5.

“Defendant had been assistant to several Medical Men, and then commenced practice on his own account.”—*Lancet*, 30th March, 1878.

The question of the sufficiency of the Salaries now paid to Medical Officers is one difficult to determine; but, taking the manner in which the duties as a whole are performed, there can be no question that the amounts paid to them from the Poor-rates are *aggregately* ample for the work which is done.

The Vaccination appointment, which is usually held by the District Medical Officer, is a remunerative one, and now that Public Vaccination is performed during only two months of the year it is attended with little trouble or loss of time. *Hygiene.*

There is also, in addition to Lunacy and Midwifery fees, and profits on instruments supplied, a liberal scale of allowances for surgical operations; and over and above these, the Guardians not infrequently make payments for burns, and other surgical cases of long duration, and usually give an honorarium when an epidemic outbreak has occurred in a district; whilst we must not forget another charge on the Ratepayer of recent introduction, namely: the retiring, or superannuation allowance made to Medical Officers relinquishing their appointment.

The payments made out of rates to the Medical Officers may be estimated as about double the amount of the fixed salaries,* these supplementary payments † having of late years rapidly

* In 1855 the salaries amounted to £144,855; but the total cost of the Medical Relief was £231,631. This is exclusive of Vaccination fees.

† One-half of the *salaries* are recouped to the Guardians out of the Consolidated Fund, and therefore falls only indirectly on the Ratepayers, but the supplementary payments fall exclusively on the rates.—[C. H.]

increased, a new Official has also been added to the Union staff, in the person of the Medical Officer of Health.*

In the Report of the Poor Law Medical Officers' Association, before referred to, *Mr. Cornwall*, of Fairford, speaking of fees for operations, said :

“*My Guardians* gave me £10 10s. for performing an important operation four miles from my house. I ASKED FOR IT, AND THEY GAVE IT TO ME!”

Without attempting to solve the question as to whether the salaries are too much, or too little, we think we may venture an assertion, without fear of contradiction, that “Medical charges” form a much larger item in the Union expenditure than Guardians, Ratepayers, or even the Medical Officers themselves are aware.

A new source of income has also arisen in the formation of Medical Clubs by District Surgeons, the contributions to which are made almost entirely by those who formerly had the assistance of the “Parish Doctor,” and in many instances the beneficial value of the club is equal to the Poor-Law stipend.

The cry so confidently raised, and so frequently repeated, that the salaries are insufficient to secure *bonâ fide* services, may produce different opinions; but no differences can arise in regard to the inefficiency of the Medical treatment the Sick Poor now receive, or that there is plenty of room for advantageous changes; and even if we go so far as to admit that the cry is true, it goes only to prove that the Guardians, equally with the Medical Officers, are parties to the cheat on the Pauper, and are unfit for the responsibilities of their position.

That Guardians do in some instances regard cheapness as the primary consideration in all their transactions, and do not hesitate to sacrifice the moral trust reposed in them, with the delusive idea that they will save money by doing so, admits of little doubt; hence, in exceptional cases, they have come to regard Medical service as a thing to be bargained for, and to offer the smallest sum which they think will be accepted, with the tacit understanding that in case of default no questions will be asked. We are, however, bound to confess that Guardians have in some degree been educated to this proceeding by Medical Officers themselves, who bring forward the increased price of beef, and mutton, or hay, and oats, as the most forcible reasons why they should receive an increase of salary.

* See Appendix.

Skilled Medicine will, however, like sterling coin, always obtain a fair exchange, and some time since, when the Wandsworth Board of Guardians wanted an Assistant Medical Officer, and advertised for one at £120 a year (equal to £2. 6s. a week), they had a single applicant, who withdrew before he had accepted the office.

The Guardians at once saw the error they had committed and raised the stipend to £150; had the appointment been one where an Unqualified Assistant could have been employed, the applicants might probably have been counted in dozens.

At the time when the Medical Districts were formed, and the salaries fixed—now some forty years since—the duties of the Doctor were undoubtedly heavy, but the “persistent” efforts of the Guardians to lessen Out-door Relief, and the improved earnings of the mechanic, and agricultural labourer, have brought about a very different state of things.

In the Report we have before referred to, the Chairman at the Meeting, Dr. Joseph Rogers, made a statement to the effect that there had been since 1865 a clear gain to the Medical Officers of the metropolis of £17,000 a year, “for that sum had gone into their pockets.” Now we know that during that period a great diminution has taken place in the number of Out-door Paupers, so that we may calculate that their work has very much diminished.

In many country districts the number of orders given by the Relieving Officer has diminished as much as eighty per cent., and we were assured by a Medical Officer the other day that the orders he now received were not one to six of those sent to him when he was first appointed.

When, in 1854, a Committee of the House of Commons was appointed to inquire into “the mode in which Medical Relief is now administered in England and Wales,” and recommended “that every Medical Officer appointed after the 25th day of March, 1855, should continue in office until he may die, resign, or become legally disqualified to hold such office, or be removed therefrom by the Poor-Law Board,” we think it must have been unacquainted with, or overlooked, the fact that, in the great majority of cases, the Poor-Law Stipend does not exceed one-fifth, and frequently does not amount to one-tenth of the whole professional income of the holder of the appointment, and that the office is very generally applied for with a view to escape the proximity of an opponent, rather than with regard to the

emolument. No sooner, therefore, is the holder installed *permanently*, than he sets about to arrange the manner in which he can escape the troubles of his office, and too often decides that the greater portion of his salary will be best applied to the payment of an *Unqualified Assistant*, who may also be employed in dispensing medicines for his non-pauper patients, and who will submit to treatment which would not be endured by a duly qualified, and well-educated member of his profession.

The then Poor-Law Board felt bound to issue their order, carrying this recommendation into effect, and in doing so, laid the first stone of the rotten fabric which now constitutes Poor-Law Medical Relief; and the sooner this edifice is demolished to its very foundation, the better for the Sick Poor, the Ratepayers, and the Medical Profession.

In conversation some time since with a Poor-Law Medical Officer, he informed us that neither the Local Government Board, nor the Board of Guardians, had any power to remove* him, or to alter the area† of his district; this assurance was given, not in a spirit of boastfulness, but with a full belief in the accuracy of his statement; and we have reason to know it is the impression very generally entertained both by Guardians and Medical Men.

Now we can imagine nothing more calculated to lead to laxity of duty than this feeling of freedom from control; it also leads to the holding of office after the active period of life has passed, or the emolument is an object of importance, and eventually to a feeling of disappointment, and discontent if a superannuation allowance is not given on retirement.

Although, as we have seen, the Local Government Board has power to determine the office held by a Medical Officer when an alteration in the area of a District is desirable, the preliminary proceedings necessary are so elaborate, as to give considerable trouble to the Clerk, and the Guardians, who therefore are seldom disposed to make any application on the subject; and as a result of long observation and experience, we are assured that great improvement in the service would result from an order of the

* Section 48 of the Poor-Law Act empowers the Poor-Law Commissioners (Local Government Board) to remove from his office, any paid Officer who shall at any time refuse, or wilfully neglect to obey, any of the rules, orders, or regulations, or bye-laws of the said Commissioners.—[C. H.]

† Article 5 of a general order dated May 25th, 1857, provides that where a change of extent of District of a Medical Officer shall be deemed necessary, and he shall decline to acquiesce therein, the Guardians may, with the consent of the Poor-Law Board, and after six months' notice given to the Medical Officer, determine his office.—[C. H.]

Local Government Board, that no appointment should be made for more than five years,* so that a revision of salary, or an alteration in the areas of districts, might at these periods be effected where it was deemed desirable; all medical appointments in one Union should terminate at the same date, intermediate appointments being held in accordance with this arrangement.

When the present Poor-Law was enacted, and orders were issued by the then Poor-Law Commissioners, it was indispensable that Medical Districts should be co-extensive with parishes; they were also made of large extent, in order that the aggregate salary should be sufficient to attract candidates where the local Medical Practitioners declined to apply for the office. But now that Union chargeability is established, and Medical Men have allowed their interests to overcome their prejudices, the time has arrived when the areas of districts may be revised with advantage, and Topographical instead of Parochial boundaries be adopted. Under the existing arrangements Medical Districts frequently overlap each other, occasioning much unnecessary travelling to the Officer, and inflicting great hardship on the Pauper, who has to walk perhaps five or six miles to the surgery, when there is a Medical Officer of the same Union close at hand.

Smaller Districts might also, in many cases, be formed with economical advantages, both as to labour and salary, as it is not unusual for a Medical Officer to have a part of his District four or five miles from his residence, but almost at the door of another Medical man; of course he has no private patients to visit here, and, as a consequence, the pauper is neglected.

In the Isle of Wight Union, the boundaries of Medical Districts are marked by roads or streams, and the arrangement is in every way an advantage over the plan adopted in almost all other places.

A patent defect in the administration of the Poor-Law, and one by which the Guardians allow themselves to be hoodwinked to the cost of the Ratepayers, exists in the present method of supplementing Parish Relief through the Medical Officer. At the Poor-Law Conference held at Oxford a short time since, Mr. Marsh, a Guardian of the Thame Union, stated

* Since the above was placed in the Printer's hands, we have seen an advertisement for a District Medical Officer, with the following condition: "The above appointment will be made for a period of five years."—*Witham Union*.—[C. H.]

that "he thought they had not sufficient control over the Medical Officers, with respect to their extras; for instance, in one Union the expense was 52½ per cent. for wine and brandy—the very things which made paupers—and only 7½ per cent. in money;" and we know the same state of things occurs in many other Unions.

An aged or infirm man or woman applies for help to the Relieving Officer, and on his or her case coming before the Board of Guardians—probably composed of a peer of the realm, two or three magistrates, a sprinkling of clergymen, and a dozen farmers—a lengthened discussion takes place, as to whether the relief shall be two shillings, or half-a-crown a week; but no sooner is this all-important question settled than the doctor is called in, who supplements (stultifies?) the arrangement by adding meat or porter, or both, and, if the pauper is querulous, or a protégé of the lady bountiful of the parish, probably a little gin or whisky, at an additional cost to the Ratepayers of three or four shillings.

This rarely comes under the notice of the Guardians, or, if at all, only in a cursory manner, it being a matter of arrangement with the Medical and Relieving Officers, and where concord exists between them, "in order that the work may be made easy to both," all goes on happy as a marriage bell.

These extra allowances will usually be found liberally, if not lavishly, made where an Unqualified Assistant is employed, his certificates being received and acted on without scruple by the Relieving Officer; and any disaffection on the part of the paupers towards him is removed, in some cases, by liberal orders of stimulants, and repressed in others by a fear of their withdrawal.

An important paper, called "The Weekly Medical Return," has been already referred to, and if the rules and orders of the Local Government Board, as to the manner in which this book shall be kept, were enforced, it would offer a key to the extent of the work done, and to the way in which the duties are performed; but as it is, it usually passes unnoticed by the Guardians, the Clerk, and the Auditor*, and frequently becomes the vehicle of fraudulent† misleading, by the visits of an Unqualified Assistant being entered in black ink as those of the Principal, and in other modes, which it may not be desirable to make generally known.

In many cases the Sick Pauper is visited once at the com-

* See Appendix.

† The punishment of imprisonment with hard labour may be inflicted on repeated convictions of this offence. —[C. H.]

mencement of his illness by the Medical Officer, and if his Assistant is sufficiently intelligent to detect symptoms of approaching death, a second visit is made; certificates of the cause of death* are, however, in many instances, given by the Medical Officer when he has not seen the deceased pauper for a long time before death occurred, and in such a case the fact is carefully kept from the friends, and also from the Coronert† of the District, that he has been attended by a person without medical education.

A case is now under our notice where a pauper receives parochial relief on account of sickness, who has been seen only once in six months by the appointed Medical Officer, all other visits being made by an Unqualified Assistant, who makes the medical return *after* it has been signed, and enters his own visits as those of his employer; all other cases of sickness throughout a large district being similarly dealt with.

The weekly medical return should in all cases be made on a sheet, to be retained by the Clerk; as a book, after having appeared at a meeting of the Guardians, may be subsequently manipulated, and made valueless for reference.

Although the Local Government Board lay great stress on the necessity of every Medical Officer appointing a duly qualified substitute, their Inspectors do not appear to enquire of Clerks of Guardians, as to whether their orders are obeyed, or as to the manner in which compliance is effected, and a substitute having been once appointed, the Medical Officer is rarely called on to nominate another, in the event of his death, or removal from the neighbourhood.

In a discussion by the Poor-Law Medical Officers' Association on this question, the loose manner in which the orders of the Board are carried out, was strongly exemplified:

The CHAIRMAN: "The Board of Guardians of the Plymouth Union went the length of passing a resolution to the effect, that they would dispense with the agreement to provide a substitute; that is contrary to the law of the land."

Mr. BALDING (Royston): "My opinion is that the law, or order, may be enforced at the discretion of the Local Government Board."

A MEMBER: "The absence of a deputy is not unusual; I am at present without one."

* See Appendix.

† See Appendix.

Dr. YARROW (St. Luke's) : " I was five years without one, and would not have to find one now, if I had not had a fall out with the Clerk."

In the order of the Local Government Board, by which the Medical Officer is compelled to name a substitute, no mention is made as to abode, or place of residence, and an ingenious course is frequently adopted, by which the object of the appointment is entirely defeated.

Two Officers of Districts, living several miles apart, nominate each other with the understanding, implied or agreed, that they shall never be called on to act, and as *the letter of the law* is observed, the practice is allowed to pass unnoticed.

The writer is acquainted with cases where the Sick Paupers are frequently left for a week, or more, to the sole charge of an Unqualified person, the substitute not being even aware of the absence of the Principal.

Every person who has closely watched the progress of events during the past three or four years, must have observed that the general rise in wages, coupled with the pecuniary losses sustained by occupiers of land, has created a feeling of bitter hostility on the part of landlords, and farmers, towards the agricultural labourer, and this feeling has had its effect on the action of Boards of Guardians in Rural Districts.

The Out-Door (including Medical) Relief has been cut down to the lowest possible dimensions; but, on the other hand, they have been reckless as regards expenditure in Salaries of Officials, and we have as a result, that every Union is provided with a Palatial Staff* whose emoluments have increased *pari-passu* with the diminution in the amount of work required of them.

In - We have before us a return of the Wycombe Union, where the cost of maintenance and Out-Door Relief together amounted to only £5,889; whilst the total cost, *including establishment charges*, amounted to £15,297.

With an absence of effective supervision by the London Board, and a deficiency of knowledge of the working of the law by the Guardians, the paid officials perform their duties, each in a manner which to himself seems most agreeable, and a tacit understanding exists amongst them that the negligence of one officer shall not be noticed by another; hence a remedy for the many evils which have crept into the working of the medical division of the Poor-Law Service, is imperatively called for.

* See Appendix.

This, we think, would not be difficult to devise, and we would suggest *one* as easy in its working, and which we believe would be effective in its action, provided any breach of its observance was visited with due punishment by the Local Government Board.

At the meeting of the Guardians next previous to the half yearly audit, the Clerk should lay before the Chairman a statement to the effect, that from enquiries made by him of the Relieving Officers, and the Master of the Workhouse, and to the best of his own knowledge, the Medical Officers of his Union—here state exceptions, if any—performed their duties in accordance with the terms of the undertaking they had entered into, and that they had complied with the orders and regulations, in force, of the Local Government Board.

This statement having been read to the meeting, and countersigned by the Chairman, should be laid before the Auditor* at the time of his passing the vouchers of payments for services of Medical Officers.

A communication from the Secretary of the Local Government Board has recently appeared in the Medical Journals, announcing the intention of the Board to communicate their views on the various points to which their attention is directed in the Memorials of certain of the Poor-Law Medical Officers, containing suggestions for an alteration in the present system of Medical Relief; but as the higher Guardianship of the Poor, through their Inspectors, has appeared to us to have fallen into desuetude, we feel bound to concur in the opinion long felt, but first boldly advanced by "*The Lancet*," that an enquiry before a Parliamentary Committee, as to the power of the Local Government Board to perform the duties allotted to it, has become necessary; and if a Member of either House of Parliament would obtain a return of every Poor-Law Medical Officer, the name of his appointed substitute (if any), with the distance of his residence from that of the Medical Officer, and the age and qualifications of the person other than himself who visits the Sick Paupers—the return being made by the Clerk—it would, we believe, show *that the poor are largely, and in many Districts almost exclusively, attended by men with little medical education, and that the existing scheme of Poor-Law Medical Relief as now practised is a*

COSTLY SHAM,

by which the Ratepayer suffers much, and the Sick Paupers profit little.

* See Appendix.

A P P E N D I X .

CLERK TO THE GUARDIANS.

It undoubtedly falls within the province of the Clerk to make himself aware whether the Officers of the Union perform their duties in accordance with the terms of their contract, and of the orders and regulations of the Local Government Board, and on failure in these respects, to report the lapses to the Guardians.

We believe, however, that in practice no enquiry is made by him on these subjects.

DISTRICT AUDITOR.

When these officials were first appointed, many, if not all of them, considered it within their duty to call for the books of the Medical Officers, and if, after examination and enquiry, they found an entire failure to fulfil the terms of the contract entered into by them, the payments made were disallowed.

This practice, we are told, has now fallen into disuse, and the audit of accounts has become a mere formality; the Auditor exercising his powers only where a dissatisfied Ratepayer demands his attention to a particular case of non-compliance with the law.

MEDICAL OFFICER OF HEALTH.

The most lucrative appointment in the gift of Boards of Guardians, and the one attended with the least onerous duties, is that of Medical Officer of Health.

It is clearly his duty to bring under the notice of Guardians, or other authority by which he is appointed, all matters

injuriously affecting the health of the community within his district, and he is specially bound to call attention to cases where Paupers suffer from the non-attendance of skilled and qualified medical practitioners.

Dr. Tatham, of Manchester, has recently in his reports forcibly expressed his views on this subject, and many others will fall short in the services expected of them, if they do not follow his example.

RELIEVING OFFICER.

If this Officer knowingly allows the "Weekly Medical Return" to be improperly kept, and is aware that visits and attendances which have not been made by the Medical Officer are fraudently entered therein, or that visits made by any other person are not entered in red ink, as ordered by the Local Government Board, and fails to give information to his employers (the Guardians), he renders himself liable to severe censure; or if he gives relief on account of sickness in cases where he is aware the Medical Officer, or his substitute, has not personally seen the sick pauper, he is guilty of a dereliction of duty, and he should be surcharged by the Auditor for the amount improperly disbursed, as he should also be where he gives intoxicating liquors, or other extra relief, on the certificate of an Unqualified Assistant.

VACCINATION OFFICER.

In many Medical Districts the public vaccination is performed by the unqualified servant of the appointed Vaccinator, and the necessary certificate is fraudently signed by one or the other; this practice is well known to the Vaccination Officer, and in some instances where it has been reported to the Guardians, the scandal has been checked, but, as a rule, he is content to gain his fee, and gives himself no trouble in the matter.

This irregularity is one specially affecting the Ratepayer as a Citizen, inasmuch as public vaccination is not limited to the poorer classes, and the payments are on a liberal scale. We have no doubt that where ill-results follow unskilful vaccination, the sufferer (by himself, or his representatives) has a good ground of action against the Public Vaccinator, and would probably obtain heavy damages, if it were proved that he had committed a fraud by employing an unqualified person to perform the operation.

REGISTRAR OF DEATHS.

This appointment is usually held in Rural Districts by the Relieving Officer, and where a good understanding exists between him and the Medical Officer, *the triumvirate of two* are enabled to register a death without fear of unpleasant investigation, and overcome a difficulty which might otherwise arise.

The objectionable feature in this double appointment, as affecting the administration of the Poor-Law, is that the Medical Officer being "made safe," the Relieving Officer is freed from any fear of his own negligence or wrong-doing being exposed.

CORONER.

Since Coroners have been paid by Salary instead of *by Cases*, they are often reluctant to hold inquests in remote parts of their district, and avoid doing so as far as possible.

It not infrequently happens that the Coroner and the Medical Officer are friends, moving in the same social circle; and we have frequently known instances where he has received his Guinea fee for swearing that the treatment adopted by his Unqualified Assistant was correct.

We have also witnessed a case where an inquest was demanded in consequence of a death occurring of a pauper who had been attended by an Unqualified Assistant, and his employer received two guineas for making a post-mortem examination to ascertain the cause of death—a curious exemplification of the legal maxim, that "no man shall profit by his own wrong-doing!"

POOR-LAW MEDICAL OFFICERS' ASSOCIATION.

This Association includes in its roll of members only a small division of the 3,500 persons engaged in the Poor-Law Medical Service in England and Wales, and, judging from the Reports before us, we fear that the welfare of the sick poor, and the interests of the Ratepayers, are to a great extent ignored in the deliberations which take place at their annual meetings.

We should have been glad to see the expressed force of the Association brought to bear on those of their members who fail to estimate properly the obligations involved in their undertaking,

and some assurance given by those present of the conscientious manner in which their duties were generally performed; and we think, if the importance of an efficient Medical service in checking the spread of epidemic outbreaks, and consequently lessening their dangers to the healthier classes, were more dwelt on, instead of complaints of unrequited services, and discussions as to the most effective method of compelling Boards of Guardians to increase their salaries and emoluments, the Members would receive a greater share of sympathy from the great body of the profession.

UNQUALIFIED ASSISTANTS.

In order that non-medical readers may be informed as to the class of persons too often employed by Poor-Law Medical Officers to perform the duties which they have undertaken to "discharge personally, and not intrust the same to a deputy," we subjoin two advertisements, both of which recently appeared in the same number of the *Lancet* :

"Wanted immediately in a Country Practice an Unqualified Assistant, to Visit, Dispense, and Attend Midwifery. Must be able to ride, and not under thirty years of age, with unexceptionable character as to steadiness and sobriety. Address, &c. &c."

"Wanted, a situation as Unqualified Assistant, to Visit, Dispense, Attend Midwifery, &c. Light weight, able to ride and drive. Address, &c. &c."

It will be seen in these announcements, which are taken almost at random, that although the most important and responsible offices of a Medical Practitioner are offered, and required to be performed, yet no question of education or fitness in a professional sense is raised, the qualifications demanded being those only which are considered a *sine quá non* in a groom, or a whipper-in to a pack of hounds.

PALATIAL STAFF OF POOR-LAW UNIONS.

In consequence of a slight outbreak of small-pox in the village of ———, a Meeting of the Inhabitants was called, and it was proposed that a Committee should be formed quite independent of the Authorities to carry out sanitary measures.

"When I expressed my opinion that in times of panic there was always a fear of doing too much, and that there was a body

of five paid—and, as I thought, well paid—Officers, viz.: the Medical Officer of Health; the District Medical Officer (or Parish Doctor); the Inspector of Nuisances; the Vaccination Officer; and the Relieving Officer; armed with full powers, and whose duties were to check the spread of disease, my remarks were met with something approaching derision. The CHAIRMAN (the Curate in charge of the parish), observing that his experience of Poor-Law Officials was not calculated to give him confidence in an emergency, and if the meeting relied on them, he thought they would be put in a hole.”—
Correspondent of the Evesham Journal.

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