

Our duty in relation to health / by William Rendle.

Contributors

Rendle, William, 1811-1893.
Royal College of Surgeons of England

Publication/Creation

London : W. Kent, [1859]

Persistent URL

<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/j7hbbutx>

Provider

Royal College of Surgeons

License and attribution

This material has been provided by This material has been provided by The Royal College of Surgeons of England. The original may be consulted at The Royal College of Surgeons of England. where the originals may be consulted. This work has been identified as being free of known restrictions under copyright law, including all related and neighbouring rights and is being made available under the Creative Commons, Public Domain Mark.

You can copy, modify, distribute and perform the work, even for commercial purposes, without asking permission.

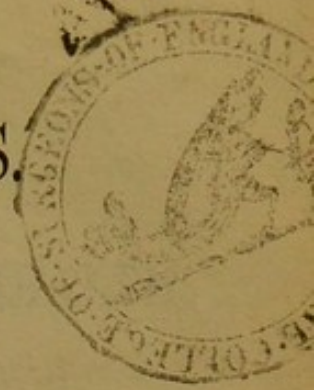
**wellcome
collection**

Wellcome Collection
183 Euston Road
London NW1 2BE UK
T +44 (0)20 7611 8722
E library@wellcomecollection.org
<https://wellcomecollection.org>

12

SANITARY TRACTS.

12



ISSUED UNDER THE SANCTION OF THE METROPOLITAN ASSOCIATION
OF MEDICAL OFFICERS OF HEALTH.

No. II.

OUR DUTY IN RELATION TO HEALTH.

BY

WILLIAM RENDLE, SURGEON,

CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER OF HEALTH FOR ST. GEORGE THE MARTYR, SOUTHWARK.

"The public health is to a very considerable extent under public control. The diseases which we suffer are generated in no slight degree by ourselves."

THE TIMES, Leading Article.

LONDON :

PUBLISHED BY W. KENT AND CO., PATERNOSTER ROW.

PRICE ONE PENNY.

1856

To

EDWARD COLLINSON, Esq.,

Chairman of the Board of Guardians, St. George's, Southwark ; and late the representative member at the Metropolitan Board of Works ; and to the numerous gentlemen of St. George's Vestry, who with him, practically believe in the great need and the great efficacy of Sanitary Improvement, this Tract is most respectfully inscribed by

Their grateful servant,

WILLIAM RENDLE.

OUR DUTY IN RELATION TO HEALTH.

IT is a nice point to decide when a man's individual liberty to do as he likes with himself or his own shall cease; when, in fact, he shall be bound in law, as he always has been in morals, to regard his neighbour's welfare, and to avoid all those pursuits which tend directly or indirectly to injure others. When law fails here, I suppose "the conscience of the agent himself should step into the vacant judgment seat and protect those interests of others who have no external protection."*

In a state of society like ours, where the different parts of the social machine are necessary, the one to the other, the higher and more noble parts of it, so to speak, cannot ignore the rest; cannot, in fact, go on without them: the employer must of course come to a stand-still without the employed, the consumer without the producer: the miseries, the diseases of the one class silently encroach upon and not seldom fatally invade the domains of the other: the mansion has often reaped a fatal harvest from the seed sown in the neglected cottage; the open street, where the prosperous tradesman lives, often receives the deadly enemy, whose birth-place is the disgusting over-crowded court hard by. Let us think a little—shall the one class steadily rise to comfort, competence and even luxury, and the other as steadily keep or sink to a bare subsistence, and to a struggle with disease and the enervating influences which come about them so readily; and when the powers and energies are in lapse of time or through social neglect gone, pass into dependence and wretchedness or haply, as is most common, to premature death?

The middle class workers can take care of themselves and their homes; they are steadily rising to higher things; but they and we must recognize as truth the words of the Orator,† that "just above our million paupers there is at least an equal number who are ever oscillating between independence and pauperism," and that "it is our sacred duty to examine why it is with all our trade, our personal industry and personal freedom, that there is still so much sorrow and suffering at the base of our social system."

* Mill, on Liberty.

† John Bright.

We are a people who pride ourselves upon our homes; the very name seems to mean comfort, the social circle, the domestic affections. "The home is made the glory of these isles, nowhere is home so dear and comfort so appreciated." But we can by no means be proud of the kind of homes now thoroughly opened to the light by the labours of Officers of Health throughout London; in fact the wide basis of duty originally set down for these men, appointed to look after the public Health, has from the force of prominent and ever present facts, become too often narrowed into reports of how badly the lower workers and the indigent are lodged, and into somewhat humiliating disputes with the owners of this kind of property. The man who works well, and is reasonably careful, should be able to return from his daily toil to a home, however humble, having the signs of comfort about it, *and the appliances of Health within it*: this the State recognizes, and consequently laws have been put forth through which we may arrive at this great result. With this condition of things the great majority of the lowest workers, be they ever so diligent and careful, have at present little or nothing to do: most of them, even thousands in my own parish, inhabit houses more or less unfit for any phase of humanity; very many are hidden away in places such as no provident, humane or large minded-man would venture to lodge his cattle in. This, as I can affirm, is the necessity of these people and not their choice. Twice lately, in my visits to the haunts of disease, have the people of the neglected side, pointed to me the improved other side of the same street, as a state coveted by them; and the feeling is growing among the people, that these improved conditions really favour health and strength. In one street where diphtheria, malignant measles, and scarlet fever had heavily visited the eastern side, where the privy smells met me, as they often do in our parish, at the front doors of the houses, one who had lost two children, appealed to me that the opposite side of the narrow street had been effectually improved and had entirely escaped. In another small street, where 55 cases and 8 deaths from epidemic disease occurred, a mother related how her now dead son sickened when he came from his work, and how he loathed his meals as the gusts came from the cesspool close to the door.

The great improvements of the day, by which noble streets take the place of obscure and loathsome alleys, are driving out the multitudinous working poor; they seek shelter with their fellows; the same places which before held enough, are now made to hold more than enough; a family can afford but a small room, and with a lodger of either sex or both, they not unfrequently herd together; all sorts of promiscuous associations take place; typhus is generated; the ordinary epidemics which would probably

pass lightly over us and die out, or happily leave our children health with immunity for the future, which under favouring conditions they usually do, are rendered more dangerous and more infectious; and new diseases pointing at like causes now and then spring up: in these places children are crammed away anywhere, the infant being not unfrequently stifled in the night, from the close packing, the heavy sleep and the foul air.

Now, say what we will, we are not a poor people; we are well able to pay for a great good; the Crimean records tell us that we can afford 100 millions when a principle is at stake, albeit, the working out that principle may involve the wholesale destruction of our fellows; and a more noble experiment tells us that we can liberate slaves, not so closely related to us as the denizens of our courts and alleys, even at a vast expence. It is notorious that we are year by year becoming a richer and more prosperous nation; our influence widens, new lands are discovered and opened for the increase of our trade and for the employment of the millions who else could find no existence upon so narrow a basis as these islands furnish. Are there not social duties arising out of this? The workers increase; are their homes to be fewer and less comfortable? Are they to be huddled together in unhealthy, foul, close places, and to be so placed that decency shall be impossible, and at the same time to pay for them a larger interest, a higher rental than would suffice to procure healthy comfortable habitations?

I claim to speak with the authority of long experience in these matters. As parish surgeon and Officer of Health, I have for twenty years been among these people: I have seen the scant supply parted for the stranger, sick and still more needy: I have seen the poor, tired and worn with the day's work, willingly watch through the night by the sick bed, whose occupant had no other claim upon them than the Christian claim that he "was their neighbour;"

I have seen the scant clothing pawned to raise money for the same purpose, and still for the almost stranger: and I am unwilling to believe that this great class, containing as it does no small number of persons capable of such acts, is either unable or unworthy to be rescued from its present filthy, sickly and demoralizing surroundings.

I look upon it that this duty which so many of our London Vestries seem so shy of, is not only an obligation but a privilege. The vestryman may by lawful authority—an authority as benevolent and full of Christianity as it is lawful—help socially to improve almost every thing about him; and by habitually viewing his surroundings with the object of improving them, he cannot but widen the grasp of his own mind, and improve and elevate himself every whit as much as he may benefit others. It is quite fair for him to dis-

trust more or less those members of his own body who hold poor property in a disgraceful condition, and who directly or indirectly stand as the opposers of sanitary improvement. His duty is clear: he will, by firmly and temperately carrying out that work for which he is appointed, give the poor man a cleaner and a more wholesome home; and he will teach the besotted, selfish man who holds property in its basest condition, so much of which lies about us, that it will be profitable to him, not only hereafter but now, to convert his dens into dwellings, and to give a people far down in the social strata, the opportunity, so far as he is concerned, of rising out of their present low condition to better things. He will see that to make a neighbourhood healthy, wholesome, and cheerful, is not inconsistent with low, or at least, reasonable rates; and he will know that those few who attempt to set such duties and such benefits against the cry of "a halfpenny or a farthing rate," simply trifle with the office, and open a question before a higher tribunal than ours, of unjust or unfaithful stewardship.

The former and present condition of the Common Lodging-Houses will show him what is practicable. The filthiest and most abandoned of our race crowded at night into these houses; the sexes were often disposed anyhow; vice and disease grew in these hotbeds; typhus usually began here; the lives of children were usually of little account; hence came the sturdy demanders of parish alms; these and places exactly similar were the favorite haunts of epidemics; here they first fastened, gathered intensity, made themselves strong, and then poured over towards places less unhappily situated: for who but knows that disease has its seed-places and its hotbeds. The Common Lodging-house Acts ordained that the occupants, usually the tramp, the lowest worker by the river side, the street mendicants, and others even less respectable, should have a clean and tolerable bed and bedroom, and ample sleeping space; that cleansing should be insisted on, including a periodical complete cleansing and whitewashing; that infectious disease if produced or admitted should not be harboured, and by consequence multiplied, but be at once removed, and the room cleansed and disinfected. These houses are now among the healthiest, although they still exist in the very worst localities, and are surrounded by filthy and infectious diseases. In my last inspection I visited 25 lodging-houses, containing 141 rooms and 827 lodgers: I found but two persons ill, one of them from intemperance. These places serve as models and as arguments if we would but see.

Further, as a proof that the mere locality, whatever its level, does not

involve an unhealthy state; the large Institutions in my very unhealthy parish* are usually, as their officers tell me, remarkably healthy, free from dangerous epidemics, even when the surrounding streets and courts are attacked. I attribute this to cleanliness, sufficient air, open space, and wise regulations, every much of which the vestryman can easily work up to.

Our intrusive visits, as some would call them, into filthy and diseased houses, on behalf of those who cannot always help themselves, have example even in the most remote times and from the highest authority. The ancient authority *went farther, was more imperative, and made it more a matter of conscience*: "He that owneth the house shall *himself* come and tell the priest, saying—it seemeth to me there is as it were a plague in the house."† The priest was then to command the emptying, so that "all in the house be not made unclean." After this he was to cause it to be "scraped within and about," and finally to pronounce when the house was clean and might be again inhabited. The Mosaic laws are full of solemn commands and wise provisions for health; and now, after the lapse of more than 3,000 years, we are beginning to appreciate the wisdom of these Jewish ordinances: a proof to me, considering the characteristic features of those times, that they are scarcely less than divine.

The Queen's preacher‡ tells us "what Christianity teaches concerning the body;" and among its other teachings this: "That the laws of health through disobedience to which such multitudes perish, are God's laws, who not only ordained them, but executes them before our eyes and upon ourselves." In this eloquent sermon, printed by her Majesty's command, we may see religion itself on the side of that true worldly prudence which cares for the health of the body, not the less because its first care is for the soul. The Clergy, I am glad to acknowledge, generally recognize this and are often our zealous fellow-workers. It could not be otherwise; we have the highest authority for this—

* Had St. George's been as healthy as St. Giles's, we should have saved from death during the last twelve years 884 persons; if as Bethnal Green, we should have saved 2496; if as all London, 1768; so that by comparison with even unhealthy parishes, we throw away from one to two hundred lives annually. But compared with the standard of the Registrar-General we lose annually 572 in excess—a type of the very unequal death-rates of different places, very much of which appears to be from local causes wholly or in part removable. Our child mortality is very much in excess: in three years, at the same rate as all England, we should have saved 494 children; at the same rate as all London, 286: half our total deaths are among children. I extract the following from my Ninth Quarterly Report:—"Among 'The Friends,' who appear to be upon the whole the most practically sensible people living, the children who die under ten years of age are not one in two as with us, but one in eight only; if we had breathed such healthy constitutions to our children, and had acted as wisely afterwards by them as the 'Friends' have, we should have lost only 42 children, instead of 174, this one quarter."

† Leviticus, ch. 14.

‡ Dr. Lee.

the precepts of the Great Master himself are of duties from the higher to lower: He says, "inasmuch as ye did it to one of these," numbering the among the rest, "ye did it to me." He takes the forlorn to Himself, and precepts become solemn obligations.

I should be unwilling to believe with a great writer,* "that on the whole the *present* Christianity is nothing better than a compromise between the Christian creed and the interests and suggestions of worldly life," were it the fact that I have, because of the coldness (to call it by no worse name) the powers overruling the local authority in my own parish, felt compelled to resign an office, the duty of which is to seek out and remove, where practicable, the manifold causes of disease; and which, impressed with the experiences of twenty years, *I knew could be abated*. This, however, is the experience of an Officer of Health in his own district only. I am as unwilling to believe that this spirit is very widely spread, as I am to believe that the Christianity we profess is a religion of scanty fruit, easily choked off by rank weeds of the coarsest worldly interests.

The lover of his kind has this consolation, amidst much discouragement of his efforts after sanitary improvement, that whether he prevents or mitigates disease or no (of which, however, there can be no doubt), he is certain that comfort, decency, morals, and that which they lead up to, religion, are fostered and maintained by the very proceedings taken in hand as leading to Health.

* Mill, on Liberty.