Reasons for appointing a medical inspector, to hold office during the carrying out of our drainage scheme : addressed to the members of the Oxford Local Board, Nov. 15, 1871.

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1871.

REASONS FOR APPOINTING A MEDICAL INSPECTOR.

At a General Meeting of the Oxford Local Board, held on the 15th Nov., 1871, Dr. Rolleston brought forward a Motion to the effect that it was expedient that that Board should appoint an Officer of Health, who should hold office during the carrying out of the Drainage Works. He spoke as follows in proposing his Motion :—

My motion is to the effect that it is expedient that we have an Officer of Health, who shall hold office during the execution of the Drainage Works. Whilst the Drainage Works are being carried out we shall have a large number of labourers to look to, as a Board of Health, besides and beyond the 37,000 individuals whom we are already responsible to. Herein lies one reason for making this appointment ; another lies in the fact that, as I shall hereafter bring evidence to show, during the carrying out of our Drainage Scheme within the precincts of our city, certain questions will arise which will have to be decided by medical advice and opinion, being, as they will be, outside of the province of our engineer. These reasons are an explana-

tion of the limitation, perhaps I should say, of the extension, of the term of tenure of the proposed office to the period during which our Drainage Works are to be in progress ; but I wish to state, at the very outset, that I have had very clearly before my mind in bringing this motion forward two ulterior advantages which the city will reap from adopting it. The first of these is the experience which we shall gain of the value of the appointment of an officer who shall act for us continuously—for two or three years is equivalent to continuousness. We may see reason to continue this office, and make it really permanent, as many other English towns have done, or we may not see reason for so doing. At any rate, we shall have better data for deciding whether such an office is worth a halfpenny rate than we have as yet had ; and it is the obtaining of such data, and not the getting in of the thin end of the wedge, that I aim at. The second of my two reasons, not apparent on the face of the words of my motion, is this,—there is much reason to fear that we may next year have a repetition of the epidemics of 1831, 1849, 1854 ; we see in every journal speculations as to this probability, and I hope to see our house set in order in preparation for this possibility. A man needs but little of knowledge to take warning from the presence at his door one year of an epidemic of one kind when an epidemic of another is but a few hours distant from it, and that in the same, and even in higher, latitudes. A man, I say, needs but little of knowledge, and he needs still less of imagination, to understand how Cholera may come one year where Small-Pox has been the year before. I wish to be in readiness to meet the onset of Cholera, a disease which is not unlikely to visit us next year, and which may be kept at bay if we keep our sanitary condition up to its proper level, as can only be done by the plan I propose. So much in explanation of the terms of my motion.

I shall give my reasons very shortly, under the two heads of our own experience and of the experience and example of other places, but before I do this let me say that if this motion is carried I shall propose that a committee of five persons, viz., of the Mayor and the Vice-Chancellor and of three other persons, to be elected by ballot by each of the three sets of persons making up the rest of this Board, viz., the representatives of the Council, the representatives of the Parishes, and the representatives of the University, be appointed to report to this Board upon the duties and the salary of the medical officer, and to send in to the Board two or more names of candidates whom, after enquiry and advertisement, they shall judge to be eligible. In a committee of five persons responsibility is neither too much concentrated nor too much diluted ; in the particular committee which I propose, you will have five persons very sufficiently under the influence of public opinion, being, as they will be, persons who are constantly acting for the public, and that not rarely, with a common responsibility. You will have, that is, a committee made up of a limited number of prominent personages, who are used to acting together, under the eye of the world. That is the best sort of committee for any purpose ; but upon this particular committee I should decline to act, even if elected to serve upon it.

I have said that our experience shows us that it will be well to have a Medical Officer of Health, at all events, at the present conjunction of circumstances, when a fresh population will come here to labour for us, and when we are but just emerging from one epidemic with the mournful probability of having to pass a little later into another. Our experience shows us that panics which may be irrational and unmanly enough, and epidemics which may be preventible are, both of them together, and indeed either

of them singly, very costly. Panics which are not justifiable, nevertheless, drive timid and foolish people away from us, and epidemics, which are not justifiable when they are preventible, throw men, women, and children upon the rates and upon private subscription. I do not wish to have to speak of our late epidemic (for in such terms I trust it may not be premature to speak of it), except in the generalities which I have just laid before you; but I may say that it would have been in one word *the very point of honour* of a medical officer appointed for any time almost, longer than six months, to have saved us from all the trouble we have just been through. By trouble I mean three things: labour which might have been spared, distress which might have been avoided, money which might have been saved. Of the labour, and of the misery, I will say nothing; Mr. Spiers, perhaps, will, as he has acted Chairman of so many Nuisance Removal and Relief Committees. Of the cost, as measurable by money, I will lay a financial statement before you, repeating that no medical officer, who was worth even such a salary as a halfpenny rate would cover, would have let these factors of the thing we call trouble have got to the head they did do. The first cost of our hospital hut was some £150; add another £150 to this item, and you have £300, which no medical officer could have avoided spending, considering how near we are to London and how many ways there are of importing infection thence. But there are some £430 additional, which the months of September, October, and November have swallowed up, or will swallow up, in our hut and tent. There are the wages of our disinfecting staff, which have now been greatly reduced in number, but who drew upon us quite lately for £16 per week, and these I take as little, if at all, under £176 (11 weeks at £16), and this without counting any of the expence of our disinfectant agents, tanks, oven, chemicals, any more than that of the prime

cost of the hut, we have an amount of £600, which is three times more, though incurred in three months only, than, I am sorry to say, several towns of my acquaintance pay to their officers of health for 12 months' work. For this sum of £600 we might have had a medical officer insuring us against preventible epidemics for as much as three years. But of course to name such a sum as this is to give a very imperfect and incomplete account of the late epidemic. How much has it added to our poor rates now 1s. 3d. in the £1; how many people has it frightened away who would have brought money here to the benefit of the ratepayers; how much has it drawn out of the pockets of the benevolent for the relief of convalescents from the disease who have lost their work, to speak of nothing else, for weeks together? It is no good, however, dwelling upon these details further if you will gather from them the homely moral that it is wise now and then to pay 6d. out of your right-hand pocket to save yourself from having to pay 1s. out of it a little later, to say nothing of having, a little later again, to have to pay 1s. 3d. out of the left-hand one.

My second line of argument is founded on the fact that very many other towns and cities in England, some larger, some smaller, than this city of Oxford, have provided themselves with Medical Officers of Health, and that those of these numerous places where I have been able to make enquiries are very well satisfied with the wisdom of their procedure, of the results of which several of these towns have had several years' experience. The facts are these: there are 688 parishes, townships, and districts under the Public Health and Local Government Acts, and of these 688, 120, or more than one in six, have Medical Officers of Health. I can scarcely believe myself that I am speaking the truth when I say this, whilst speaking in favour of appointing one in Oxford; is it pos-

sible, I ask myself and you, that there are one hundred and twenty townships, parishes, and districts wiser than we are—is it possible that we are so far behind so many other places, and have to make up our mind, at this time of day, to what other towns have long been actually practising? Well, if I have difficulty in believing this myself, I cannot expect you to believe it without seeing it, and so I have brought down *Knight's Official Almanack* for you to see it, and there you can see that the very first town, one which comes early in the alphabetical list, Aberdare, which has a Medical Officer of Health, is a town of 38,000 inhabitants, of just about the same population, that is, as the district under our jurisdiction. I don't know anybody in Aberdare, but Leicester has a Medical Officer of Health, and knowing one of the residents there, I got him to put me into communication with this medical officer, Dr. Crane, from whom I have received a number of reports there annually issued, which makes me think that Leicester has made a very advantageous bargain for itself in dealing with Dr. Crane. My friend in the meantime writes to me as follows:—

"Leicester has had Medical Officers of Health from the first. It is a popular, a useful, a necessary appointment for any large town that is being kept in proper sanitary state. He is paid £200 a-year (began £150). He is not debarred from practice; is in practice as a Physician, M.R.C.P. I asked him to give me a summary of his duties; he says it will fill pages, but gave me a verbal outline:—To attend weekly meetings of the Board of Health (oftener if required); to inspect nuisances, premises, pigs, &c., &c., and give opinion as to necessity of removal; to give his advice in all matters sanitary on which the Board may require it. Besides this, there is a vast amount of volunteer work that any one must undertake if he has any

enthusiasm. He has copies of the birth and death register supplied him by the Corporation. From these he spots all the cases of deaths of fever, of scarlet fever, or of any epidemic, and goes and gets the history and examines the premises. He compiles weekly and annual bills of mortality, and writes an annual report."

Let me here say, that the words, "Medical Officer of Health," in my motion, are to be taken to mean an officer who undertakes to do something of this kind and extent.

I wrote next to Bristol, where, as is well known, a most valuable officer of Health, Dr. David Davies, has for many years preserved, that large city from ignominious panics and costly epidemics, who, in spite of all the disadvantages which an old city labours under, prevented the Cholera, which slew five thousand persons in London in 1866, from ever attaining any great head there in that year. Dr. Davies has written many valuable papers on Sanitary Administration, the more valuable as they come from a man who is actually and practically immersed in actual practical battle with disease. To one of those, published last week in the *British Medical Journal*, Nov. 11, before I quote his letter to me, I will refer, as it deals with the qualifications of Nuisance Inspectors, and is the complement of another (*ibid*, September 30th, 1871), on the "Trials and Difficulties of a Health Officer." From it I will quote a sentence, which may save some of this Board's time by anticipating the possible objections of some one or other of its members:—"Nuisance Inspectors," says Dr. Davies, "are indispensable assistants to health officers, qualified members of our profession, but still only assistants. Unless guided, supported, and assisted by the experience and influence of medical officers who can command the respect of the public, they will fall

easy victims to the thousand and one theories of self-made sanitarians who abound among the unoccupied and affluent residents of our large cities, who have been the victims and supporters of all the mischief-producing theories which, like a blight, have spread over our scientific medicine." What follows is Dr. Davies' letter to me :—

"Nov. 18th, 1871.

"My Dear Sir,—A Health Officer is absolutely essential in every great centre of population, and more especially so when public works are being carried out which will permanently affect the sanitary condition of a place, and of all other works the drainage of a place, next to its water supply, is the most important of all. In connection with it, questions must daily arise which will require medical advice, such as the avoidance of danger whilst all drains and cesspools are tapped to make new sewers. The necessity, or otherwise, of ventilation in different parts of the system, the general superintendence, with the assistance of trained inspectors, of the connecting drains. To see that each connection with a house is *properly trapped*. If this be overlooked your drains will prove a great evil instead of a blessing. Drains and sewers, through neglect of this, are often the means of propagating disease. I have again and again found enteric fever sent into a house through an untrapped overflow pipe in the soft-water cistern. At Keynsham, lately, they had trapped their street gratings and sent all the gases into their houses, the ejects of the houses being untrapped. In the drought of 1870 we had quite a little epidemic of it in good houses in Clifton, through the water in the overflow pipe having evaporated. Three cooks fell successively in one kitchen ; the soft-water cistern was underneath, and the water in the trap gone. I called the attention of the public to it, and sent my inspectors round, and

'the plague was stayed.' An officer of health, by watching the courses of enteric and other zymotics, would put up the flag of distress before much mischief is done, and he would carefully watch the connection of zymotic diseases with the drainage. Without an officer of health there is only a vague and uncertain report diffused through a place regarding the public health, that report being often short of the truth, but more frequently an alarming exaggeration of it. A place without a health officer is like a ship at sea without anyone on the look out. My salary here is £200 per annum, but I am allowed private practice. This is not as it should be. There is more work here than any man can do properly by devoting his whole time to it, but I am blessed with excellent nuisance inspectors, who keep me out of trouble. I could get more salary by merely asking for it."

We must try to get a man like Dr. Davies.

At one of the Scientific Congresses held this year I find that Merthyr Tydfil, a township near to Aberdare, and, like it, provided with a medical officer—the good example of the one having spread to the other, as I trust the good example of the two combined may to us—could give the following account of itself. (See *British Medical Journal*, Sept. 2, 1871.) Dr. Dyke, the medical officer there since 1865, had to direct the modes of dealing with outbreaks of cholera, typhus and relapsing fever. Taking the acknowledged truism that "contagious fevers spring from single cases," he argued that the early separation of the sick from the uninfected should prevent the spread of those diseases, and proceeded to instance the modes of dealing, based upon this argument, with the epidemic of Cholera in 1866, of Typhus in 1868-9, and of Relapsing Fever in 1870-1. These means were the removal of the sick to hospitals provided for the purpose, and of the uninfected to places of

temporary refuge; the fumigation of the houses with sulphur, then the transfer of all clothing to a stove, in which it was exposed to a dry heat of 230 deg., the washing of all walls down to he plastering, cleansing furniture with water and carbolic acid soap, and destroying all rags by fire, the free use of disinfectants in the houses, soaking soiled clothes in water containing disinfectants, and the addition thereof to all excretions. The results which seemed to follow this practice were, that Cholera, which in 1849 destroyed 1 out of 30 of the people, in 1866 claimed but 1 victim out of 391. The annual mortality from Typhus was formerly 23 in 10,000 living; in the years 1866-70 it was reduced to 8 per 10,000. The rate of deaths from Relapsing Fever was 2 and three-tenths per 1,000. After the adoption of the modes of removal, &c., the duration of cholera was but six weeks, while typhus and relapsing fevers yielded in two months. The town of Merthyr used to be exceedingly unhealthy. A good supply of pure water, regular scavenging, sewerage, &c., resulted in lessening the death-rate from 36 per 1,000 in the years before 1850 to 24 per 1,000 in 1866-70, while the average age at death was increased from 17½ to 27½ years. The imperfect working of the sanitary laws was pointed out, but it was stated that even these, with the "hearty goodwill of the authorities," could be made of great use, both in preparing for the advent and for the treatment of pestilence. In conclusion, instancing the fact that Relapsing Fever prevailed at Tredegar for two years, and yet that no public information had been given of this epidemic, he urged the compulsory registration of cases of Small-Pox, Typhus, and its congeners, and Cholera, as a means through which all sanitary authorities might be warned of the nearness of danger, and thus might be enabled to burnish and sharpen their sanitary armour."

I deprecate the allowing of any other delay in this

matter than such as will be necessarily entailed by the deliberations of the committee of five, which I shall ask you to appoint. The whole subject has been most abundantly discussed upon several occasions before almost every member of this present Board. My particular motion relates to needs which either certainly will, as in the case of the execution of our drainage work, or probably may develope themselves within a few months; and this motion has been several times postponed in order to give everybody the fullest opportunity of making up his mind as to its merits. The sooner we act upon it, the cheaper we shall find it, and the better return we shall get for our outlay. I would ask the Board to recollect the old story of the King and the Sibyl with the Sibylline books, but I rather dread the introduction of a jocose element into this discussion, and such an allegory might savour a little of merry-making. For what I specially deprecate in the discussion of my propositions is the uprising of a certain frolicsomeness, which has, in my judgment, now and then caused this Board to make mistakes. Some members are a little prone to give way to an appetite for the pleasurable excitement of opposition, and without, as far as I have seen, exactly meaning it, they sacrifice now and then their love of fairness to their love of fun. But a spirit of contradictoriness which is usual, and may be even laudable so far as it is amusing, upon other occasions, is, I submit, out of its proper sphere of display, when we are deliberating upon matters as serious as the increase of rates and the decrease of human life and happiness. I will end with the serious words, "There is that scattereth and yet increaseth, and there is that withholdeth more than is meet, but it tendeth to poverty."