

A letter to the members of the British Medical Association, on the subject of their future journal / by Robert B. Carter.

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A LETTER 6.

TO THE

Members of the British Medical Association,

ON THE SUBJECT OF

THEIR FUTURE JOURNAL.

BY

ROBERT B. CARTER, F.R.C.S. (Exam.);

Fellow of the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society.



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A LETTER, &c.

GENTLEMEN,

It is well known to most of you that, at the forthcoming Annual General Meeting at Leamington, your attention will be called to the position and usefulness of our present weekly Journal.

Some months ago, having had much reason to think about this matter, it occurred to me that the Association would be able, at the cost of a small self-sacrifice on the part of some of its members, to commence the issue of a publication that might, if rightly conducted, be of very great advantage to the profession. I have determined to lay my plan before you in detail ; in order that it may be maturely considered prior to the time at which it is intended that your suffrages shall be asked concerning it.

It will probably be conceded that the medical profession, as a body, is deficient in corporate organization, in corporate funds, and in the means of influencing educated public opinion. We are in daily and hourly contact with the public at numerous points, and are liable to be judged by the public on numerous matters, about which we ourselves know much, and our judges very little. We are entirely without the means of guiding or informing them, or of defending the members of our calling against the most unfounded attacks or the most unjust depreciation, in any other way than by our personal influence upon individuals. It has happened to me more than once to converse with some intelligent patient about some standard medical grievance, such as the position and remuneration of parish doctors, and to be asked, at the close of the talk, " Why do not you gentlemen put this view of the case, or these facts and arguments, before the public ? You would soon get a reform if the public only understood the question as I understand it now." Of course, the personal influence of medical men, exerted in this way, might be enormous, if it were systematically used and properly directed ; but, as a matter of fact, this cannot be done. We have, as a rule, neither time, nor inclination, nor opportunity for the *vivâ voce* enlightenment of our respective neighbours ; and we therefore frequently submit to what we know and feel to be injustice ; while those by

whom the injustice is inflicted err, for the most part, through their absolute ignorance of the real state of the case.

At various times some great exceptional effort has been made to remedy this evil, and most of such efforts have failed conspicuously, simply because they were exceptional. Mr. Griffin has laboured zealously for many years in the cause of the Union surgeons. He has gained the respect and gratitude of his brethren ; but what has he effected for their relief ? His pamphlets and publications have been sent to members of Parliament, who, in all probability, regard Mr. Griffin as a crotchety man with a grievance, and throw his writings into their waste-paper baskets. The public have never been reached at all. The gentlemen whom we meet at dinner, or on a railway journey, have never for one instant been made to think about the question. They neither know nor care whether the doctors for their respective parishes are paid three shillings a case, or three halfpence, or three farthings ; and they are content to assume that the offices would not be accepted if they were not worth having. How different would be the present state of things if the facts and arguments of Mr. Griffin had been presented, with adequate literary skill, to the readers of some high-class journal,—say the *Edinburgh Review*, or the *Quarterly*, or the *Cornhill*, or *Macmillan's Magazine*,—with sufficient frequency to maintain and strengthen the first impression that was produced. The way in which Boards of Guardians cheat and rob their medical officers, as part of the system on which they cheat and rob the poor, would have been long ago rendered impossible ; and the reform that is so greatly needed would have been compelled, not by the efforts of the profession, but by the righteous indignation of the public.

The subject of medical relief under the poor law is only one of many which are regarded, by ourselves and our employers, from very different points of view. The observance of a proper code of medical ethics is at least as important to patients as to practitioners ; but patients do not, as a rule, understand that this is so. They usually consider "medical etiquette" to be something wholly arbitrary and unreasonable, and they frequently tempt practitioners to violate its rules. If patients and their friends were better instructed,—if they had ever been made to look below the surface of the matter, we should obtain their assistance, instead of their hostility, in the practical enforcement of precepts based upon sound principles.

Looking a little farther abroad, we may discern a number of questions which affect our remuneration, and which therefore affect indirectly our social status, and which resolve themselves into a demand, on the part of the public, for an improper degree of cheapness. Our dissatisfaction with the governing

bodies of some hospitals and dispensaries, with the naval and military authorities, and with the public service generally, with the directors of assurance offices, and with the managers of clubs for the poor, may all be referred to this one source of grievance,—that we are expected to be content with a payment that is insufficient, either in money or in consideration, or in both. And, on this point, we see some of those who should be our natural leaders ranged on the side of our adversaries. We see some of our examining bodies engaged in an unworthy and degrading struggle for fees, and refusing to require from their candidates such a preliminary and professional education as the present state of medical science renders necessary. We see teachers of medicine abusing their position as members of the Medical Council, and preventing the adoption of a higher standard of examination, avowedly lest it should for a time diminish the number of pupils at their respective schools, and thus diminish the amount of their receipts. To this sordid policy we are indebted for the admission into our ranks of the men who enable the Horse Guards or the Poor Law Board to set every principle of justice at defiance. Against such a combination of adverse influences, against pressure from without and traitors within, we are at present utterly powerless. We should be powerless no longer if we could instruct the public, if we could teach patients what is the precise value of a cheap doctor, and what is the nature of the process by which the article is manufactured for the market.

There are many subjects of universal interest, for example, hygiene, education, and, above all, the monstrous evil of quackery, on which we possess special knowledge of great importance, and on which the public are abandoned to the guidance of *ignes fatui*, such as “it stands to reason.” On these subjects we are entirely without the means of disseminating sound and wholesome teaching.

We know, of course, that all the matters above referred to are frequently discussed, with much ability, in the leading articles and correspondence of the medical journals. To what good end is this? We know, in a general way, nearly as much about them as the writers do. We have had no occasion to dress our knowledge in precise forms and epigrammatic sentences, but still we understand the gist of the matter. We do not usually feel that we have been instructed, but we say of the letter, or the leading article, “That is very true—very well put. I wish I could show that to the squire, or the rector, or (more important still) to the Lady Bountiful of the district.” Unfortunately, the previous page displays some anatomical or pathological engraving, or the next letter refers to a subject unsuited for non-professional readers; and so, upon the whole, it is plain that the medical journal had better be retained by its owner. Moreover, the weekly journals, even if they reached the public, have

not space enough to treat medical matters with the fulness that the public require. Addressing instructed readers, they take for granted many things that for general readers would need demonstration; and hence they are not calculated to act upon the minds of any but medical men. And the ultimate result is that, on all the questions that may be said to be at issue between the public and the profession, there is much concord among ourselves, and complete discordance between ourselves and our patients.

I infer, from all this, that we greatly need a recognised and legitimate channel through which to reach the public, and to guide and influence public opinion; and I assume that the public opinion most worth influencing is that of the educated classes, by whom, practically, the country is governed. It is found by experience that no journal can be really influential that requires to be subsidized, or that fails to find support among those to whom it is addressed; and hence our object could only be attained by a publication that would be bought by educated readers on account of its own merits, as well as on account of its being the organ of the medical profession. Such a journal might, I conceive, be set on foot and maintained by the British Medical Association, and might present the following characteristics:—

1. It should be published quarterly, by some publisher of repute; and should have every advantage in the way of paper, printing, and general appearance.

It is manifest, however, that, in this matter of title, the projected Review should be steered warily between two opposite dangers. Its work at first would be, not simply to minister to, but absolutely to create, an interest in the public mind about subjects appertaining to the medical profession. For this reason, there should be nothing in its aspect to interfere with its success—or to make a non-medical reader turn away from it with indifference. On the other hand, it would be necessary, both for the dignity of the Association, and also in order to give authority to the Review, that a flag should be shown about which there could be no mistake. This might be done in various ways; among others, by mentioning upon the cover the proprietorship of the Association, and by carefully explaining the objects of the Review in a prospectus.

2. Its title should be brief, distinctive, and, above all, not medical. The aim of the journal should be, I think, to exhibit its connection with the profession by the tone and character of its articles, rather than by its name, or by any declarations in the articles themselves. It would be very important, especially in the early numbers, not to deal so exclusively with medical topics as to become wearisome to the general reader, and not to assume an outward appearance that might give, to a casual observer, an impression that the cover inclosed a medical journal in the ordinary sense of the words. It might, perhaps, be possible

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to obtain the consent of the venerated founder of the Association to the use of his name; and, in that case, I can suggest no better title than "The Hastings Review: a Quarterly Journal of Literature, Science, and Politics." This would at once be a mark of respect in which we should all cordially join, and would leave the contributors at liberty to treat the current books and topics of the day from a medical, or from a purely literary or scientific point of view. X

3. The contributions should, in every case, be anonymous. The object of the staff should be to gain weight and influence for the Review, not for individual writers.

4. The Editor should not himself be a contributor. I mentioned this in the letter to the *Lancet*, in which I first suggested such a journal, and drew down upon myself some amusing comments from persons unacquainted with the practice of first-class reviews and newspapers. In such the Editor does not write. His function is to judge of and select from the writings of others; and experience teaches that this function cannot be properly discharged by one who competes with those among whose works he has to decide. Besides this, a writing Editor is apt to give a wearisome mannerism and sameness to his journal, and to write a great deal more than any one but himself will care to read.

It must not be thought, however, that this restraint of the editorial pen in any way diminishes the importance of the editorial office, or the difficulty of discharging its duties. The success or failure of such a Review as that which I suggest would depend, in a very great degree, upon the personal qualities of its Editor. Whatever his capabilities, there would at first be no lack of willing contributors. But to harmonize and control the general tenor of their writings, to secure the cordial co-operation of an efficient staff, to provide the variety required by the reading public, and at the same time to repeat with sufficient frequency statements that required to be driven home, to recognise literary ability in unknown volunteers, and utterly to exclude inferior compositions, from whatever quarter offered,—all these things could only be done effectually by a combination of taste, firmness, and sound judgment which, if the Association were so fortunate as to obtain, it would be difficult for the members to estimate too highly.

5. All contributions should be paid for at the highest current rate. In no other way would it be possible to obtain a sufficiently numerous and skilful staff, or to give the Editor the independence necessary for successful management.

I turn now to the question of expense, and on this I speak with the authority of an experienced publisher. I believe the Association numbers about 2400

or "Literature, Science, & State Medicine"

members ; but, to facilitate calculation, I put the number at 2500. For a quarterly journal, of the size and appearance of the Psychological, each number containing twelve sheets, or 156 pages, the cost per year for 2500 copies would be

	£	s.	d.
Paper, printing, and office expenses, (rough estimate)	720	0	0
Contributors, at £8 8s. 0d. per sheet,	400	0	0
Editor, say	200	0	0
	<hr/>		
	£1320	0	0
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Or a total, not including delivery, that would scarcely exceed one half of the subscriptions of the members. Delivery by post would cost £125 annually ; but, with the mechanism of the Association, it would be very easy to devise a less costly method, as far as all residents in large towns are concerned.

In order to effect a sale outside the profession, my informant thinks that £100 a year should be spent in advertisements ; but calculates that advertisements, to at least the same amount, might be expected for insertion. He thinks the best arrangement would be for the Association to pay the Editor and contributors, and to contract with a publisher for a supply of the Review to the members at per head, the publisher keeping the supply of the public in his own hands. Upon this part of the question I am at present hardly prepared to express an opinion. In some cases it might be necessary to pay £10 10s. a sheet for contributions ; and, if this sum were paid invariably it would increase the annual expense by £100.

On the whole, without going into minutiae, the estimate clearly shows that a quarterly journal of the highest class might be put into the hands of the members for little more than half of the annual guinea.

It therefore follows that, over and above the gain of a means of influencing the public, we should obtain considerable power of purse. It is quite beyond the scope of this letter to enlarge upon the ways in which such a power might be usefully employed ; but it is manifest that the possession of an income of £1000 or £1200 a year would enable the Association to choose between several kinds of activity, legal, parliamentary, or scientific, from all of which it is at present precluded, by reason of its indulgence in the costly luxury of a weakly medical journal. Among other suggestions for useful expenditure it has been said that £500 a year might be devoted to the succour of brethren variously oppressed, and £500 to the aid of the Provident Fund. I think it would be rash to dispose of our surplus too hastily, and am content to point out that it would

form a lever that might be used in various ways. If the Association were able to spend £1000 a year in the furtherance of its objects, whatever they might be, I can even imagine that its existence would be recognised in Parliament, and no longer ignored by the bulk of the newspaper press.

It is well known that we number among our ranks many writers of great skill and capacity ; and I am sure that the Editor of the projected Review would find it possible, without going beyond the profession for contributions, to fill his journal with essays, articles, and reviews, of the very highest class of thought, scholarship, and general literary ability. I believe that a journal so maintained by the profession could not fail to reflect great credit upon our body ; and to be in itself, apart from the instruction conveyed in its special articles, a powerful means of elevating our social status.

I believe, moreover, that many of the questions which arise at the various points of friction between the profession and the public have never been thought out, in all their bearings, by many amongst ourselves ; and that we, as well as our patients, should gain largely by having them carefully considered and written upon by practitioners of learning and experience.

In the course of the last few months, I have discussed the projected Review with many members of the Association ; and I have hitherto only heard one objection raised against it. In the opinion of the majority, I sincerely believe that this objection will be an actual recommendation ; for it is that the issue of a quarterly Review would imply the abandonment of the weekly journal.

To the weekly journal, there can be no doubt, many of our members are still attached ; and others, who themselves estimate it at its true value, nevertheless believe that it acts as a bond of union between us. It has even been reported that there is somewhere a practitioner who sees no other medical periodical, and who belongs to the Association for the express purpose of seeing ours. I should conjecture that this report must be an exaggeration.

The ordinary contents of the *British Medical Journal* may be divided into original contributions, including correspondence and papers read at the various meetings ; intelligence, including the reports of societies ; editorial compositions of various kinds ; and official announcements about the Association and its branches.

The original contributions on scientific subjects are usually highly interesting and instructive, and are sometimes of extraordinary merit. It is manifest, however, that only a few of them absolutely enlarge the boundaries of professional knowledge, and that the majority, however excellent as records of personal experience, do not at all enter upon the previously unknown. For the

former class, and even for most of the latter, it is equally manifest that space would always be found in some of the medical journals that are supported by private enterprise. Even if this were not so, I should much doubt the propriety of our supplying the needed channel of publicity. I think the Association is more calculated to foster and promote the social than the scientific progress of the profession; and that the more its efforts are concentrated upon the former, the more certainly will they be crowned with success.

The correspondence that does not relate to scientific questions is very often upon personal disputes or disagreements, about which it is impossible for those who are not concerned to feel any but the most languid interest. This department of the journal is maintained by a small minority of our body, and the cessation of their letters would certainly not constitute a professional calamity.

In point of intelligence, the *British Medical Journal* is usually one week, and often more, in arrear of its contemporaries.

The editorial compositions would not, I venture to think, be missed by any living creature. They are chiefly remarkable for having attained that degree of extreme badness at which no amount of ingenuity could find any means of making them worse.

The official announcements are in many cases superfluous. Branch meetings are convened by circular, and the insertion of the circular in the journal is unnecessary. There can be no doubt that the other weekly journals would afford space for any announcements that were really needed; or the difficulty might be met, in a way hereafter to be mentioned, by the occasional publication of "Proceedings."

Upon the whole, therefore, I believe that the suppression of the journal would not inconvenience any of us, excepting the possibly fabulous personage who is said to limit himself to its perusal. From him, and perhaps also from those who find that an occasional letter to the editor affords a salutary outlet to feelings of personal irritation, I think the Association may fairly ask for an act of self-denial, and for the cheerful abandonment of a private luxury in aid of the general welfare of the profession.

I hasten to say, before proceeding, that the past career of the journal, under its various titles, has been of great and unquestionable utility. It has knit together the scattered members of the Association. It has served to form and consolidate our body; but, by absorbing nearly the whole of our income, its existence keeps us in a state of helplessness. I think its work is done, and that the Association is now sufficiently mature to be independent of its help, and to commence a new career of active vitality. By surrendering the journal, and in no other way, we shall obtain the funds with which to make ourselves felt as a power in the state,

and with which to commence a publication that will enable us to influence extra-professional opinion.

It would be improper, however, that the British Medical Association should be left without some record of its public acts ; and I would suggest that this want might be met by the publication of quarterly or occasional "Proceedings," somewhat resembling the Proceedings of the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society, and containing the minutes of the Council and Branch Meetings, with such other matter as the Council might from time to time determine.

I have said already that no really influential journal will require to be subsidized, and I have no doubt that the projected Review would be largely purchased by the reading public. If it were not, it would manifestly fail in its primary objects, and would have to be discontinued. Like any other new undertaking, it would require to be liberally fostered at the outset ; but, in the course of two years, its position should be quite independent.

I should propose, therefore, that, after the lapse of two years, members of the Association should have the option of subscribing a guinea to receive the Review, or half a guinea without receiving it, but retaining all other privileges of membership. In this way the Review would cease to be a burden upon those who did not care for it, and who might still, at a diminished cost, give their support to the other undertakings of the Association.

It is purposed, at the Annual General Meeting at Leamington, to submit a motion embodying the project sketched in this letter, subject to such modifications as further consideration may suggest. Let me remind you that, if the proposed alteration be carried out, and be found detrimental to the interests of the Association, it will at any time be easy to return to the present state of things. The only question is, whether the Association be strong enough to lay aside leading-strings and to enter upon action ; and I have not the slightest doubt that an experiment would determine this question in the affirmative.

In comparison with our actual numbers, the attendance at a general meeting is usually small ; and active exertion might obtain a majority on either side of a question about which many of us had scarcely made up our minds. The issue about to be raised is so important that it ought to be decided by our whole body ; and this can only be done by the use of proxies. The editor of the *British Medical Journal*, who has been active in endeavouring to procure the privilege of voting by proxy for the Fellows of the College of Surgeons, will doubtless exert himself to procure the same privilege for us ; and, even if he should perceive some reason to refrain from affording his assistance, I am informed that an opportunity is likely to be given for the expression of our individual opinions upon the point.

In order to accomplish any reform, on account of the prevailing distrustfulness of change, it is usually necessary to organize, to agitate, and to wait. I believe I may say that those who are interested in the project I have sketched will not accept an adverse vote as final, until the influence of time and further argument has been fairly tested. I shall be glad to receive communications from all who approve of the scheme, and will support it, or who see a way to modify it with advantage; and I shall be especially glad to hear from those who will be willing to speak in its behalf at Leamington. There are, I know, many practitioners who are kept out of the Association by the present journal; and to these I would say, Join, and assist in our endeavour to bring about a better state of things. If we fail in 1865 we may succeed in 1866; and there are those who will not be deterred by one failure, or by two, or by three, from agitating the question until they are satisfied that it has received its final solution.

I am, Gentlemen,

Your very faithful servant,

ROBERT B. CARTER.

Stroud, Gloucestershire,

April, 1865.