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Contributors

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Royal College of Surgeons of England

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What is the Matter with the Medical Profession ?

BY

JAMES P. WARBASE, M.D.

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WHAT IS THE MATTER WITH THE MEDICAL PROFESSION?

By James P. Warbasse, M.D.,

of Brooklyn, N. Y.

THE science of medicine has made wonderful progress in the past fifty years, much knowledge has been added, and its capacity to help the sick and preserve the well has been greatly increased; but the average patient, with the average ill, who consults the average doctor does not get the benefit of it. This is because the doctor cannot afford the pains to give it, nor the patient the money to pay for it.

Most doctors and most patients are poor; and nearly all doctors and patients live in the fear of poverty, which is almost as bad as being poor. The poor man is always a dangerous person. It is the same, whether it be doctor or plumber who feels the pinch of poverty. The poor doctor is urged toward quackery, abortions, and illy-advised treatments; the plumber, out of a job, easily becomes a "hold-up" man. The fact that patients are poor means that they demand cheap cures, to gratify which the doctor too often must play the part of a charlatan.

The discussion of the causes of poverty is not within the scope of this article, but I believe poverty is capable of elimination from society, just as I believe that small-pox, typhoid fever, and tuberculosis are. There is abundant wealth for all; and there is no good reason why the working class, which produces the wealth, should have the least of it; neither is there reason nor justice that the man who works faithfully at useful labor should live and die in poverty.

There are many things which once were private enterprises, much exploited for profit, but which now have been taken out of the hands of competitive business, and are controlled by the people. As examples of the socialized necessities may be mentioned the public schools, the highways, water supply, street cleaning, and sewage disposal. The air for our lungs remains public property, but the food, oil, coal and wood have been taken away from the people and not yet restored. All of these are important; so is the public health. Some day the care for the public health will be organized from top to bottom throughout as a public service; and we shall have each district with its medical corps. The sanitarian will be the strong man. His first business will be to keep his district as free from sickness as possible. His second business will be to keep his death rate low. This he will accomplish with the co-operation of the district hygienists, internists, surgeons, and other specialists.

The criminal now receives the attention of the state, why not the sick man? The two have more in common than is yet realized. Society is beginning to acknowledge that the criminal is more sinned against than sinning. He is a victim of social mal-adjustment. Society is responsible for him. It made him what he is. This is equally true of the sick man. If society did not directly inflict him with his disease, it is apt to be the case that he is suffering as the result of lack of education; or his disease is the

result of the wretched economic conditions imposed upon him. The sick man, the man out of a job, and the criminal are equally social problems. Society must soon answer in the affirmative the question that has come down through slavery and feudalism, "Am I my brother's keeper?" It must learn the meaning of the old gospel that, "No man liveth unto himself alone."

It is owed to the sick man, just as much as to the criminal, the insane, or the idiot, that society treat him as its especial obligation. How much more should this be the case with the child-bearing woman, who is now left in the hour of her travail, to the chances of medical traffic for profit?

When the working man's house is on fire, the community provides for him the most effective measures which wealth can secure to avert disaster. When his baby is stricken with disease he is left to the mercy of commercial exploitation. Property, as an outgrowth of feudal tendencies, is still regarded by lawmakers as more precious than human life. The socialized fire-fighters prosper, as the fire is quickly and effectively extinguished; the commercialized disease-fighter prospers as the patient is saved with the greatest amount of fuss and the greatest expense that the employer can, with satisfaction, be mulcted of. This latter fortunately, is not yet the invariable rule in medical practice. Let us say it is an exception to the rule. But the fact is not to be disputed that "business methods" in medicine are steadily on the increase, as the pinch of economic necessity becomes greater.

Municipalities that have moved forward a step now have bureaus of fire-prevention. Some day more public attention will be given to the prevention of disease. If the sick man is to be the care of the people, and if the state is to be held responsible for him, surely it should have a still greater concern for the well man, for of the two the latter is the more important.

The doctor has his talents to sell. He is in the market. The competition is fierce. Most doctors are capable and able to deliver the goods. But comparatively rarely can they afford to give the time to do the best possible thing for the patient. As a business enterprise, the practice of medicine—an occupation capable of most unselfish and beneficent activity—degrades its practitioner to the necessity of frittering away precious time in placating the whims of hysterical females, recounting his own prowess, animadverting upon his competitors, and stultifying himself with the mediocrity of conformity. The interest of business demands it. The general practitioner who neglects the methods of the tradesman, even though he gives to his patients the benefit of surpassing skill and knowledge, is apt to languish for a clientele. An unnecessary equipage, entailing a serious drain upon his finances, is often one of the "successful" physician's burdens. It is difficult, nay, impossible for him to do otherwise. He is surrounded by the competitive system, and, unless he conforms to the methods of the warfare about him, he must go down.

There are physicians with independent incomes, the results of the fortunes of others; and there are those whose unusual talents bring them so much work as to place them outside the circle of competition. Both of these are exceptional. The doctors, along with all who have to work for wages, are feeling the affects of

the gradual gravitation of the means of the production of wealth into the hands of the few, and the resulting growing discrepancy between the rewards for honest work and the cost of living.

It was not many years ago that a man who had a steady job was not thought of as a poor man. "He works every day," meant that he was not poor. Today the reverse is the case. To say that a man is a working man, that "he works every day," is equivalent to saying that he is a poor man. It requires but a few days of idleness to exhaust his surplus store; and then he must accept charity, steal, or starve. As to hard work earning him rest in his old age, it does not come except as the dole of charity.

The capitalistic system under which we live is increasing the cost of living faster than it is increasing the wage-earner's income. This is inevitable. Every economist who has grasped the problem since Karl Marx wrote "Das Kapital" has recognized this as an inevitable outcome of the present system. It will continue until the majority of the people recognize it as intolerable.

Let us not make the mistake in this connection of pointing to the public service as corrupt, and politics as more corrupt. They have been corrupt, and they will continue to be, so long as surrounded by the capitalistic, competitive system. But when the people own the necessary means of production, when they own the social necessities, when the fundamental movement to abolish poverty is instituted, then the chief corrupting influences will be removed. The corruption of public officials is accomplished mainly by business interests. It is the great corporations that corrupt our legislative bodies. This is so well recognized that we grow indifferent to it, and the horror of its consequences scarcely sinks into the public conscience. The express companies are, but the Post Office Department is not corrupting legislatures. Private corporations are corrupting the Post Office Department, but the public is not interested in corrupting itself.

The Medical Corps of the Army and Navy are removed from the field of commercial competition, and although surrounded by the pernicious influences of the competitive system, they maintain a high standard of efficiency. The inconsistency of our method is that the medical treatment of soldiers is socialized. Soldiers receive the best of medical attention, not as a charity, but as a right. But the laboring man and woman and child are left without such consideration. They who do the work of the world, and without whom no army could be assembled, are called "hands," and are consumed as so much raw material to be fed to the flames of commerce. The nearest society comes to giving them the attention that it accords to its soldiers is when abject poverty overtakes them. Then they may have bestowed upon them, by the Departments of Charities and Correction, medical attention.

Some day the workers, who create the Nation's wealth, and the women who bear the children, will be appreciated as being of an importance equal, at least, to that of the soldier. Our civilization has not yet reached that point, for the worker has only just emerged from serfdom, while the soldier has behind him the prestige of many thousand years of fatuous superiority.

When the practice of medicine is taken out of the realm of commercial competition, the aptitude of the physician may then

be considered. At present there is no vocational selection with reference to adaptability. In the public service there is. In medical practice there is dreadful waste of talent. There is no means for selecting and appointing to be a surgeon the man best qualified for surgery. It is largely a matter of chance. The result is that men who should be alienists are surgeons, and men with wonderful natural aptitude for surgery are general practitioners.

The socialization of medicine does not mean that there shall be no private practitioners. Undoubtedly there will be, just as there will be private business enterprises in fields which do not involve the necessities of life, or which spring up because of individual preference or expression. But whatever springs up outside the State, if it is desirable for all of the people, will find itself shortly taken over by the public. A physician of some special talent, or anarchistic taste, may prefer to withhold himself from the State and stand alone. Patients should continue to have the privilege of delivering themselves into the hands of private enterprises, just as now, if they so desire.

Quackery is one of the results of our competitive system. The patent medicine business depends upon advertising. Competition compels the newspapers to collusion with this class of crime. Self medication and the resort to quackery are encouraged as business enterprises by all the powers of business, as well as by the economic necessities of the patients. Give the working man the privileges of competent medical advice without cost, precede this by the education that is now denied him, and he will spend little money on quackery. Even though he might be inclined to, there should be no quackery for him to patronize. In a country socialized in the interest of the people, and the god of business profits cast down from its throne, a league for the freedom of quackery could not exist.

The socialization of the care of the public health is not going to check scientific competition. It is going to stimulate it. The greatest scientific advancements in medicine are not now coming from the field of the commercial struggle for existence occupied by the medical practitioner. They are coming from the men who, by public or private means, have been removed from its blighting influence. The financial reward has not been the object which has stimulated the great medical discoveries. Now it is well recognized that the doctor who is engaged in the competitive struggle for a livelihood is the least apt to contribute to the progress of science. Surgery is the last exception, but it is rapidly becoming commercialized, and soon its best progress will depend upon the financially independent workers.

Institutions endowed by private means or supported by the State, institutions removed from the field of business competition by virtue of the extraordinary talents of their workers, and branches of the Government maintaining medical departments are the sources to which we now look for the best advancement of medical science.

Servetus and Harvey were not spurred on to the discovery of the circulation of the blood by the expectation of profits. One was burned at the stake and the other was mobbed for his pains. Read the life of Pasteur, the founder of bacteriology and the science

of infections, and see how utterly free from the glimmer of gold is the work of this great man. Yellow fever, malaria, typhoid, tuberculosis, hook-worm disease, sleeping sickness, and rabies have had their secrets discovered and the possibility of their mastery demonstrated by scientific men competing not for profit but for service. That the "curse of gold" appeared in the development of anesthesia is the one stigma upon this great boon; but had the dirty question of profit never entered, we should have had anesthesia just as soon.

The whole history of medicine, with its splendid list of martyrs, is a glorious refutation of the sophistry that competition for profit is important to human progress. The competitive system, which surrounds and harasses medical advancement, hindered it from the beginning, and retards it still.

When humanity throws off the burden of competition for the necessities of life; when the distribution of wealth is regulated by the deserts and needs of the people; when human life and happiness shall be the object of solicitude of the State; the profession of medicine will take its place as the great conservor of the most precious of the Nation's natural resources.

The matter with the medical profession is that the doctor is a private tradesman engaged in a competitive business for profit. He should be a public servant. His importance to the people and the value to the Nation of their physical well-being demand it, and some day will receive it.





