

Report of the sub-committee on Poor Law Dispensaries, in relation to the general question of remedying the abuses of the Out-Patient Department of the public hospitals and dispensaries of the Metropolis / [Spencer Wells and others.

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[Charity Organisation Society]

R E P O R T //

OF THE

Sub-Committee on Poor Law Dispensaries,

IN RELATION TO THE

GENERAL QUESTION OF REMEDYING THE ABUSES

OF THE

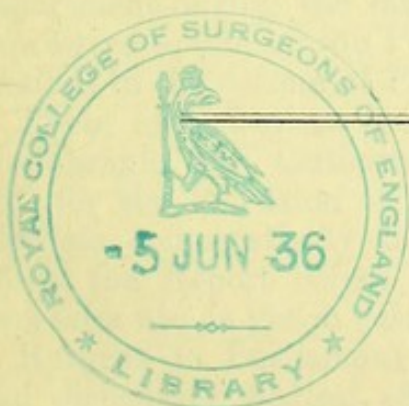
OUT-PATIENT DEPARTMENT

OF THE

PUBLIC HOSPITALS AND DISPENSARIES

OF THE

METROPOLIS.



LONDON.

—
1870.

REPORT

Sub-Committee on Poor Law Administration

IN ANSWER TO THE
GENERAL QUESTION OF REMOVING THE ANGER

OF THE
OUT-PATIENT DEPARTMENT

FOR THE HOSPITALS AND DISPENSARIES

METROPOLIS.

LONDON.

R E P O R T .

THE Sub-committee on Poor Law Dispensaries have met several times and have obtained a large amount of information on the subject entrusted to them. At their first meeting they were favoured with an official *resumé* of the progress which has been made in the establishment of dispensaries by the Guardians. This *resumé* has been published in the last Annual Report of the Poor Law Board, where it is accompanied by a full discussion of the principles involved. The Sub-committee have taken the evidence of Dr. Rogers, the President of the Poor Law Medical Officers' Association, who has paid great attention to the subject. They have also communicated with Dr. Bridges, Inspector of the Poor Law Board, with the object of ascertaining if any further steps are about to be taken for the purpose of securing an uniform, efficient, and complete introduction of the dispensary system, and they cannot learn that the Poor Law Board have any immediate intention of issuing any orders relating thereto.

The Sub-committee have had the opportunity of perusing the Report which has been prepared by the Sub-committee on General Hospitals, and they desire to express their approval of the principles therein laid down. They entirely agree with the opinion that the great extension of the hospital out-patient department during the last thirty years is largely due to the repressive action of the Poor Law, and to the serious imperfections in the system of Poor Law medical relief.

These imperfections were abundantly proved by the Right Honourable Mr. Gathorne Hardy, when he introduced his Bill for the Provision of Dispensaries in 1867, and in many districts comparatively little change has as yet been made whilst the Report before alluded to shows that only six dispensaries are as yet in *comparatively full* operation.

Returns to Parliament confirm the experience of hospital and dispensary medical officers that a large number of poor have been compelled to resort to public charities for want of that kindly, efficient, and continuous treatment which it is obviously the duty of the guardians to supply. In many cases the medical officers have been so overwhelmed with work and so shamefully underpaid, that it would have been unreason-

able to expect that they should perform their duties in a satisfactory manner, whilst no attempt appears to have been made by the Poor Law Board to enforce proper efficiency, by any systematic inspection of the manner in which the work is done. The whole arrangements appear to have been left to the management of guardians, who have in many cases shown their want of appreciation of the importance of the subject by systematic neglect.

The Sub-committee are also of opinion that no reform in the out-patient department of the public hospitals and dispensaries, worthy of the name, can take place without such an improvement in the administration of Poor Law medical relief as will take away every excuse for the practically unlimited gratuitous out-patient system, which, under the existing arrangements, is necessarily required. They are of opinion that the Act of 1867, for the Establishment of Dispensaries in the Metropolis, is fully calculated to meet all the requirements of the case. And this opinion is also supported by the medical press, and particularly by the Poor Law Medical Officers themselves, the Association over which Dr. Rogers presides having repeatedly urged their establishment upon the Poor Law Board. It is to be regretted, however, that the Act has been mutilated, partly by the doubts which have been thrown upon its interpretation by the Poor Law Board, partly by subsequent legislation, and most of all by the fact that guardians, who cannot be supposed to have much knowledge of the subject, have been left entirely without instructions as to the best way in which its provisions may be duly carried out.

(1st.) With respect to the intention of the Legislature we would observe that, wisely or unwisely, it was clearly understood that in passing the Dispensary Act, Parliament intended to introduce the Irish system. Promises were indeed made that such regulations should be issued by the Poor Law Board as should afford security against the abuses which prevailed in Ireland; but it cannot be doubted that it was intended to provide free medicine to all those poor persons who had not the means of providing it from their own resources, whether they were in the receipt of other kinds of relief or not. Nor can it be denied that such persons have, even under the English Poor Law, a legal claim to such assistance. The guardians are bound to relieve all who are "destitute" of any one of the first necessities of life, and it cannot be doubted that in many cases prompt and efficient medical attendance is more necessary even than bread itself. This indeed is the common practice of the law in Ireland, where

it has been shown to work successfully, not only as regards the diminution of sickness, but the diminution of the rates. And it has been largely acted upon in many English unions, where the guardians have shown a due appreciation of the intimate relation between sickness, premature death, and pauperism. Indeed the relieving officer dares not refuse an order for medical relief, where, after due inquiry, he is convinced that the applicant has not the means of paying for it, and that health and life may possibly be lost for want of it.

The Sub-committee, therefore, do not consider it necessary to rebut the opinions of the Poor Law Board, that the independent classes will be induced by a system of public medicine to give up their self-supporting organisations and resort to public medical officers. That can alone be obviated by proper inquiry, and the danger makes it the more important that the Poor Law Board should issue the promised regulations for checking the evil. It is sufficient that Parliament has in fact conferred upon the "destitute" the right to free medical advice, and that the want of it has given rise to an amount of indiscriminate medical relief at hospitals which is assuming a dangerous and demoralising extension.

It is to be observed also, that the free and gratuitous administration of hospital and dispensary medical relief tends to maintain the present unsatisfactory administration of Poor Law medical relief, by proportionately relieving the guardians of the duty imposed on them by law, whilst the habit of receiving charity is propagated upwards to a class of persons who ought to provide the assistance they require, by joining friendly societies to which general practitioners are usually attached, by subscribing to provident dispensaries, or by directly employing medical men who are willing to undertake their treatment on terms suitable to their condition. This appears to be a more substantial objection to free charity, which is controlled with great difficulty and accepted without shame, than it is to the Poor Law system, which by means of a numerously-appointed staff of inquiring officers can effectually prevent imposition, and put a proper amount of moral pressure upon all who ought to pay.

The Sub-committee therefore repeat that the reform of the abuses of the out-patient department of hospitals must be preceded, or at least accompanied, by an improvement in the Poor Law system.

(2nd.) In the next place, the Sub-committee are of opinion that the Act of 1867 should be at once and promptly carried out. There can be no doubt that Parliament intended to confer upon the Poor Law Board sufficient powers for that

purpose. The wording of the Act is similar to that which had been found sufficient in the case of Ireland, and it is greatly to be regretted that steps were not taken in England similar to those which were found successful there.

Although endowed with full powers, the Poor Law Board never took the necessary initiation of issuing orders for the election of Dispensary Committees, and without those orders the Guardians could not carry out the law; many of the Guardians were also ignorant of the merits of the proposed institutions, and impressed only with their probable expense, took advantage of the inaction of the central Board to maintain the imperfect system which had so long prevailed. Under the pretence of legal difficulty, which would in many cases have yielded to the orders of the Poor Law Board had these been issued, matters were allowed to drift on, until it was thought necessary to obtain from Parliament further powers, which have resulted in transferring the management from independent Dispensary Committees, to Boards of Guardians. By this transference the character of the management has been seriously impaired, and the main feature of the Irish system, viz., its distinction from Poor Law relief, properly so called, destroyed. Thus in Ireland the appointment of a Dispensary Committee appears to have had the great advantage of securing a far superior class of managers than are usually found to act upon the Guardian Boards. Gentlemen who have a strong objection to participate in the administration of what is undoubtedly at present a harsh and repressive law, have no objection whatever to act upon a board which confers such an enormous boon upon the sick and suffering poor, and by its good and charitable offices prevents so much misery and pauperism; whereas, by placing the management in the hands of guardians, this charity becomes an anomaly in the system, and tends to perpetuate and even increase the evils associated with out-door relief. Indeed, until the administration of the Poor Law in England is completely altered the association with it of dispensaries is calculated to impair the success of the principle adopted by Parliament, of making a special exception as regards medical relief, and of giving it freely to all who cannot provide it for themselves.

But it may be said that the guardians do, in fact, appoint a Dispensary Committee out of their own body. It must, however, be observed that unlike the Committee provided by Mr. Gathorne Hardy's Act, this Committee is subordinate to the whole board; indeed, it has happened that the recommendations made have been rejected, either for economic or other reasons, in consequence of the majority of the board not

having any knowledge whatever of the requirements of the case. It is also found that the recent amalgamations of parishes and unions, and the reduction in the number of guardians, have resulted in so large and increased a tax upon the time of individual guardians that the introduction of the system of dispensaries has been greatly retarded, whilst the supervision is likely to be extremely imperfect, owing to the large number of workhouses, schools, infirmaries, &c., of which the various boards have charge.

On these grounds it seems desirable to restore the independence of the Dispensary Committees, the more so as the representation upon them of Boards of Guardians is sufficiently secured.

(3rd.) The Sub-committee are of opinion that the progress reported as to the establishment of dispensaries is by no means satisfactory; and whilst they are glad to know that the attention of Dr. Bridges has been for some time past directed to the subject, and that the Poor Law Board has put some pressure upon certain Boards of Guardians, in order to induce them to adopt the dispensary system, yet that these steps do not absolve the Poor Law Board from the duty of issuing the orders and regulations, which are necessary for their proper management and uniform introduction, and of placing them under the supervision of a qualified inspector.

With respect to the first it may be observed that the forms and regulations now in use were issued more than thirty years ago, and it is evident that they have failed to secure discrimination in the administration of medical orders—the personal attendance of the officers, or continuous and kindly treatment of the sick; whilst they have afforded no sort of guarantee that proper medicines have been supplied. The Sub-committee are of opinion that it is desirable that the Poor Law Board should issue a series of instructions to the guardians or managers, in respect both to the object of the law and the mode of carrying it out; such instructions to include regulations as to the classes entitled to medical relief—the nature of the relief to be given—the kind of premises required—the number, duties, and salaries of the officers employed—the regular personal performance of those duties—the registration of disease and of its treatment—the economical provision of drugs and surgical appliances—in fact, such forms and regulations as are best calculated to secure an uniform and efficient administration of the law. With respect particularly to the provision and use of drugs, they would specially recommend their issue, as in the army and navy, from a common store, in which an officer should be employed to test their purity. The

system of obtaining drugs by means of numerous contracts, each involving the purchase of small quantities, makes examination impossible; whilst the temptation is offered to guardians, who know little of the subject, of obtaining their drugs at the cheapest rate. The drugs are paid for from the common Poor Fund, and the metropolis would be more cheaply, and, at the same time, more satisfactorily supplied by contracting for large quantities with wholesale dealers and manufacturers. Economical administration should also be promoted by a certain restriction as to the kind of drugs supplied, and by the promulgation of a suitable pharmacopeia and of convenient formulæ.

These arrangements should, in the opinion of the Sub-committee, be placed under the special supervision of an inspector, who should be authorised to visit and report annually, through the Poor Law Board to Parliament, on the manner in which the work is done.

In conclusion, the Sub-committee recommend that a memorial embodying their recommendations be addressed to the Poor Law Board, and that the President be requested to receive a deputation to support the prayer. They would also recommend that copies of this Report be forwarded to the various members of the Cabinet, to the Right Hon. Gathorne Hardy, M.P., to the metropolitan members, and to those members of the Legislature in both Houses who have taken interest in the question of Charity and Poor Law relief.

SPENCER WELLS, F.R.C.S., *Chairman.*

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