

**Letter addressed to the Right Honourable the Lord Provost, Magistrates, and Town Council of Edinburgh, regarding the institutions of medicine / [Peter Reid].**

**Contributors**

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# LETTER

ADDRESSED TO

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE

THE

LORD PROVOST, MAGISTRATES, AND TOWN-  
COUNCIL OF EDINBURGH,

REGARDING THE

INSTITUTIONS OF MEDICINE.

667;31  
670;3  
910;7

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BY

PETER REID, M. D.

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LAWNMARKET.

1821.

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# LETTER

## THE RIGHT HONOURABLE



I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 14th inst. in relation to the proposed alterations in the regulations of the Council of the Royal Society, and in reply to inform you that the same have been forwarded to the Secretary of the Society for their consideration. I am, Sir, very respectfully,  
 Yours faithfully,  
 W. B. ELLIOTT, Secretary.



“excellence; they that reject him, know not  
“his delcience.” Indeed, there is a myste-  
rious uncertainty hangs about our profession,  
which connects it strongly with the black art,  
and gives a great Doctor somewhat the air of a  
great conjuror; so much so, that I would en-  
gage to match an impudent quack, gifted with  
the small cunning, shuffles front, satisfied

MY LORD AND GENTLEMEN, self-confidence, and especially belong to his order, against the first

**I**N offering myself as a candidate for the In-  
stitutions of Medicine, which Chair I under-  
stand is about to become vacant, I take the  
liberty, in the first place, to remind you of the  
difficulties you must encounter in appreciating  
the abilities of medical men,—how much you  
must necessarily be in the dark regarding the  
real nature of those talents and attainments  
which fit a man for teaching medicine as a li-  
beral science, which unhappily do not always  
correspond with those which fit him for prac-  
tising it as a profitable art. I dare say many  
of you would have as much faith in the skill of  
an old wife, as in the first physician in Europe;  
and that you would as willingly submit to the  
cantraps of the one, as to the prescriptions of  
the other. Johnson has observed, that “ a  
“ physician in a great city seems to be the  
“ mere play-thing of fortune; his degree of  
“ reputation is, for the most part, totally ca-  
“ sual; they that employ him, know not his



“ excellence ; they that reject him, know not “ his deficiency.” Indeed, there is a mysterious uncertainty hangs about our profession, which connects it strongly with the black art, and gives a great Doctor somewhat the air of a great conjuror ; so much so, that I would engage to match an impudent quack, gifted with the small cunning, shameless front, satisfied self-confidence, and decisive manner, which specially belong to his order, against the first medical head in the three kingdoms, not only in the run for popular favour, but actually in carrying off the suffrages of one half of the profession.

Generally speaking, the whole world, high and low, are equally mob in judging of medical talent ; and you all know the arts which are commonly most successful with a mob. A Doctor of moderate plausibility can persuade the most of his patients that he has cured all those whom he has not killed ; and satisfy the relations of those he has murdered, that the death was owing to his not being called in proper time. Human nature is every where credulous with respect to physic ; and more especially in this gloomy climate, so apt to give us a thinking stupidity, and set us a prosing at what people under more genial skies laugh at, we are much addicted to doctors, drugs, and the dry sulks.

Cause and effect, with which this city has



rung of late years, till the pillars of orthodoxy began to shake, and old divines, and grave men of business, found themselves lost in the metaphysical quibbles of school-boys, are no where traced with so much difficulty as in medicine. There, they are modified by a thousand circumstances so minute, and so perpetually varying, as often to elude the sagacity of the most penetrating. Hence one man's experience is at eternal variance with the experience of another, and fashionable drugs, and fashionable doctors, change with the moon: hence every man has his favourite pill and potion, which ever and anon obey his whistle, though they wont listen to the call of any other person.

Although medicine has principles which give it the stamp of a liberal science, although it opens a wide field for intellectual exertion, and requires a range of knowledge sufficiently varied and extensive, yet so much nonsense has in all ages been mixed up with its truths, that at last the *Theory* of Medicine has actually, amongst practical men, become a bye-word, which is scarcely ever uttered without a sneer; and to theorize, is supposed to imply a juvenile propensity to crude speculation, which a little experience will correct, or to betray a head furnished with scholastic jargon, at the expense of common sense, and sadly at variance with any capacity for accurate observation or sound thinking; so that you would really think they

But, Gentlemen, you will remember



had adopted in good earnest the ridicule of Tristram Shandy, who says of a man speaking absurdly on a subject, that he was talking about it after the manner of great physiologists, who explain not what a thing is, but what it is not.

On the other hand, our practical men cry out for facts, but the greatest practical head this country ever saw, observed, that medical facts turned out, in the infinitely greater number of cases, to be no facts at all; and a late eminent Professor, whose death has left such a chasm in our school, seems to have been so much convinced of this, that he scarcely thought it worth his while to change any of his lectures for the last thirty years, or even so much as allude to one in a thousand of the medical productions of his day. Whether this was right or wrong, this is not the place to discuss; but I shall perhaps take another opportunity of examining the effect which his lectures, aided by the almost unrivalled ease and animation of his manner, have given to the tone of medical thinking throughout the country, and the influence which they exerted on the character of this school. But this is not the time nor place to nibble at the faults of a great man, although I really feel some difficulty to repress the desire of critical scratching, the itch for which is by far the worst itch in this place, and the lights and shades of his character afford such a fine opportunity for run-



ning on in a string of smart distinctions, and playing off the whole vocabulary of the art. I cannot, however, refrain from observing, that it is a pity he should have spent so much of his time in abusing pie-crust and dram-drinking; but he had run away with a notion, that “*a crammed kite makes a crazy carcass.*”

From what has been said above, you may be inclined to ask, if the theories of medicine are generally nonsense, and its facts generally lies, what are the foundations on which it rests? You will perhaps think, that since its principles are so uncertain, and its practice so capricious, the appointment of any person to drivel over such a subject, is a matter of little importance, and may be disposed of without any very scrupulous inquiry into the comparative merits of the candidates.

If the nonsense in medicine was merely speculative, and had no reference to human life, you would judge right, and boys might be allowed to amuse themselves with blowing air-bubbles,—with raising one man of straw after another, and knocking him down again, till they got tired of the sport. This would form a pleasing sequel to the history of Jack the Giant-Killer, and the Fairy Tales of their early days, and would likely vanish for ever at the bed-side of the first patient they were introduced to; just as the theories of Patriots fly off, whenever they catch a scent of the loaves and fishes. But, Gentlemen, you will remember



that medicine often kills or cures, that nature is seldom left to her own process, that ignorance is busy and meddling, and that we are not left to an unerring instinct, but to a fallible reason, which, with all its blundering propensities, is our surest guide in the last resort.

All this may be made clear by a case or two. When Tom Thumb the Great felt a strange commotion within him, and was not sure whether it was love or the windy colic, if the physicians called in had failed to make an accurate distinction, the result might have been fatal, and poor Tom would have burst with flatus, or lost his sweetheart.

In the same way, if any person, finding himself unwell, should, before consulting the Faculty, betake himself to some notable dame in the neighbourhood, she will probably inform him that one thing will carry the disease downwards, and another will carry it upwards; that this will drive it out to the skin, and that will make it sit down upon the vitals. She will descant on the dry herbs, that therefore dry sores; the moist ones that moisten them; and the sweet ones that sweeten them. All this she will illustrate by a case in point, stating that a certain lad of her acquaintance was at death's door with a certain distemper, and had consulted all the doctors of the country without relief, when he was advised to try *Maggy Macgilpine's saw*, which wrought like a miracle, and brought him round in a twinkling.



These simple annals, Gentlemen, contain the rudiments of our art. It is from such humble beginnings that it has grown to its present portentous magnitude. For as doctors have not all agreed about what is best calculated to carry the disease up or down, out or in; and as many of them have had the audacity to affirm that they had a *saw* of their own as good, nay, even much superior to Maggy Macgilpine's; medical erudition has grown with medical discord; one book is written to refute another, till the shelves groan under the mass of our contradictions; doctor preys upon doctor, and occasionally gives the fraternal hug with a cordiality which you may have some faint idea of, if you consider what passes in your own breasts when a rival in trade plants a shop next door to your own, and has the assurance to announce a better article at a lower price.

But, Gentlemen, you are not to infer from this, that physic is useless, and that it is absurd to

“ Fee the doctor for a nauseous draught.”

The value of medicine, like many other things which are meant to prop up our frail nature, does not so much consist in the positive good which it bestows, as in the evil which it prevents; and you will admit that he is to be considered as your benefactor, who prevents another from murdering you. For instance, every



one sees that the Press is at this moment a two-handed weapon, of awful energy for good or evil ; but then, as Madame de Stael happily remarks, the evil is not to be corrected by putting out the light, but by bringing more light. Boerhaave states, that the blundering practice in one disease alone had done more execution than all the campaigns of his time. Indeed, the sum of misery inflicted on this diseased land by quack medicines and quack Doctors, with degrees and without them, the extent to which they poison the springs of life, and spread suffering, torture, and death, would scarcely be credited ; but must be highly gratifying to the admirers of Malthus, (providing they escape themselves), as counteracting with wonderful activity the tendency of our population to outgrow the means of subsistence.

What is the conclusion from all this? Not surely that medical education is to be neglected, but that it is impossible to be too careful in the elementary discipline of those who are to be entrusted with the health of their fellow-citizens. In this point of view, I maintain that the Chair of the Institutions of Medicine, embracing what comes within its legitimate scope ; unfolding the laws of man's physical structure in health and disease ; entering largely into his moral and intellectual habits ; and above all, in giving the first impulse and direction to young minds in the exercise of their faculties on pro-



fessional subjects, is unquestionably a Chair of the very highest importance, and one upon which the character of the Medical School of this place essentially depends.

It is in a great measure according as this class is taught, that medicine is either exalted to the character of a liberal science, or debased to that of a low routine art. It serves more than any other to fix the standard of professional excellence, and to give that tone to the student's mind, which, as it is well or ill directed, delivers the health of the community into the hands of men liberally bred, or of trading quacks. Indeed this school, when it ceases to stand pre-eminent for imparting something intellectual to medicine, and teaching its principles on the broad grounds of a liberal science, must soon fall into contempt, and the profession must partake of the degradation; for without this alliance, as Burke has justly observed, there is something illiberal sticks to all the arts.

I come now, Gentlemen, to the most awkward part of this letter, that is, to state my claims to the Institutions of Medicine, should a vacancy occur in that Chair. I am just as well aware as any of you, of the ridicule attached to a statement, the purport of which implies the puff direct or indirect at every word; but without affecting more humility than my neighbours, I take the liberty of mentioning the following facts.



After having been as liberally bred to medicine as any of my fellows, both at schools and hospitals, and with very different views from the laborious drudgery at which it has been my lot to toil, I have now been engaged for many years in teaching medicine privately, embracing a wide survey of its different departments, and more particularly a full analysis of what constitute its principles as a science. Perhaps the following transcript from the bills in which I have been in the habit of announcing my course for several years by-past, will convey some idea of my plan.

DR REID will, on the 20th November, commence his Course of Examinations on the Principles of PHYSIOLOGY, PATHOLOGY, THERAPEUTICS, MEDICAL CHEMISTRY, and the PRACTICE OF PHYSIC.

As an erroneous opinion has gone abroad, that the above Course is merely subservient to Graduation, DR REID thinks it necessary to state, that while they serve this purpose, he considers it a primary, and much more important object, to direct the Student in the general conduct of his Studies, by discussing, in a familiar way, all the leading Facts and Doctrines which are most worthy of his attention in the above fundamental Branches of Medicine.

In the above Course, the mode of teaching by Examination is adopted, because continued Lectures, however necessary they may be in detailed Courses on particular Branches, and however valuable in other respects, by never calling for any exertion on



the part of the Student, miss perhaps one of the most essential ends of instruction. If the Lecturer never comes in contact with his Pupil, he can neither ascertain his progress, nor regulate his Studies ; he leaves him a passive hearer, without exacting any exercise of his mind, or leading him to form those habits of just thinking, and intellectual activity, which are the best fruits of Academical Education, and lay the surest foundation of professional Skill.

This mode of teaching, though little calculated to give me the notoriety and other advantages of a public class, has afforded me opportunities of judging of the strength and weakness of this school, of the effects of different modes of medical education, of the previous cultivation of the mind necessary to render it liberal and effective, and of the errors into which young men are apt to fall, both from an ill-directed plan of study, and from an ignorance of the discipline and œconomy of their own minds, which it would not be very easy to arrive at in any other way.

It has happened, from gentlemen wishing more particularly to define and arrange their knowledge, after having completed a course of University studies, and immediately before standing candidates for the highest degree of this school, that I have been generally attended by advanced students of the most liberal class, most of whom have not only had previously all the advantages of this College, but



many of them of the other distinguished Universities of Europe. My Pupils are now scattered through the world, and if I thought it either fair or becoming to collect their evidence on this occasion, I believe I should be sufficiently flattered by the result. What I here contend for is, that I have had opportunities, which fall to the lot of few, of sifting the principles of medicine, of appreciating the results of medical education, and of the use and abuse of the understanding in its various departments: whether I have improved these opportunities or not, must be left for others to determine.

It only remains for me to say, if there should be any gentleman amongst you disposed to listen to my claims, I trust that, in the discharge of his public duties, he will not overlook the duty he owes to his own family. Let him not think that I say this in the raw simplicity of a recluse scholar, totally ignorant of men and things,—a stranger to corporation politics, the influence of patrons, good customers, kind cousins, and other honourable connexions. But really, as one good turn deserves another, and as I am sincerely grateful for seeing any thing like a glimpse of manly feeling, and straight forward dealing, and honest intention, I hope that no worthy man will throw away a vote on me, by which he might have turned a penny in the way of trade.



I have now been pretty well seasoned to hand work, and my health is a little the worse of it, but many a better man has been wrought to death; and although, in a peevish mood, one might be apt to complain at being condemned to earn dry husks with hard labour, yet I must see more clean hands, and honest hearts, than I have had the luck to meet with, before I trouble my head about mending the constitution, and coming in for my share of the new order of things. I only beg that accomplished gentlemen, who are wallowing at their ease, would not begin to preach about content, and the equality of lots upon the whole, particularly after a surfeit: for in this learned city we are all great preachers,—it is the rank disease of the place, to “preach and prate about what others prove.”

Now, Gentlemen, I bid you adieu; I wish you all well, I wish you all in “goud and gear to shine;” and I have only to put up my humble petition,—for God’s sake, for Christianity’s sake, let no *gude* citizen, if ever he should be tempted to lay one hand on a dirty job, forthwith lay the other on his heart, and pretend to act the saint; for, of all the abominations that stain this canting land, including the cold and dry-brained cant of infidels, and the cant of tories, whigs, and radicals, what my soul abhors the most, is to see a sanctified hypocrite raise his eyes to heaven, at the mo-



ment when he is stabbing the character of an honest man.—I am,

MY LORD AND GENTLEMEN,

Your most obedient,

Very humble Servant,

PETER REID.

*P. S.*—By the bye, perhaps, from your virtuous indignation at the iniquities of the present corrupt generation, you may think it a matter of small importance, whether they are killed or cured; would it not then be a deep stroke of policy, though somewhat selfish in you as a body, if you were to elect me to this Chair, independently of any merit on my part; for as I have not one personal acquaintance amongst you, and never shall speak one word to any of you on the subject, nor yet a good friend to speak a word for me, and as, moreover, I have no patrons amongst either Tories or Whigs, and of course am somewhat undecided in my politics, you now have an opportunity which may never occur again, of proving to the public, that where such a serious interest as the character of a National School is at stake, you neither look to the right nor to the left, but decide according to the best of your judgment. But this is between ourselves, and must not go farther.

P. R.