

THE ABSURDITIES OF THE QUARANTINE LAWS, AND THE ORDERS IN COUNCIL RESPECTING THE IMPORTATION OF DISEASE.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—It is now some weeks since the London press, with a degree of energy and feeling that was highly creditable, aroused the public mind to the sufferings entailed upon some of their countrymen by the operation of the cruel and unscientific quarantine laws. Your own journal also eloquently denounced some of their provisions, but the subject (by that *inertia* which characterizes the public mind, excepting when its attention is immediately arrested) seems to be passing into oblivion; or perhaps we may assume that the quarantine regulations are becoming popular, from the singular orders in council that have lately appeared. But it appears to me that there has lately been so much unnecessary severity exercised towards the unfortunate men who arrived from the coast of Africa with imputed yellow fever on board their ship, and so much that is inconsistent in the subsequent disposal of them, that the subject well deserves further consideration.

Whether or not quarantine laws are ever effective in preventing the inroad of a new and wide-spread epidemic, as in the instance of cholera—whether even they are ever really effective in preventing the successive inroads of old epidemics, as plague, &c.—I would not assert dogmatically; but the general opinion is decidedly against their having any such protective powers. The more that the origin and nature of epidemics, and the laws that regulate their transmission and progress, are known, the more, I believe, it will be found that they are fatal from causes that are general and antecedent, and predisposing to the advent of any given epidemic. How much may depend on telluric, or lunar, or astral agency; how much on excess of moisture with high temperature, or on those unseen, but still sometimes appreciable differences in external agencies around us, remains yet to be solved. But with regard to the epidemic called yellow fever, I believe I am correct in asserting that it has never yet appeared as an epidemic, either in its simple or its malignant form, in any country beyond the 40° or 45° of north latitude, or where the mean summer temperature has been less than 75° or 80°; and that in its native seats its infectious character has been very generally questioned.

Now if this be the case, the disease that prevailed on board the 'Eclair,' when that ship arrived in England, cannot be regarded (as it seems to have been) as yellow fever. What, then, was the disease? Figure to yourself that ship, containing within its narrow compass a mass of human beings, amongst whom free ventilation is impossible, with the provisions and the water, the coals and the oil for its machinery, all undergoing a more or less decomposing process; the sun vertical; the temperature still further increased by the steam fires in the ship; and lying off the low pestilential shores of Africa. Fever appears on board, not infectious, it may be, in the first instance, but soon becoming so, aided by the combined causes above mentioned, and increasing more and more in virulence with each succeeding case, until the ship becomes a focus of the most deadly animal poison; but now the disease has lost the character of a malarious fever, and has assumed the form of malignant typhus; or rather, it is another form of the old jail-fever, now ship-fever, taking its initial character from the African.

On the arrival of a ship in this condition on our shores, what would humanity, what would science, what would common sense, dictate, as the proper course to be pursued? I conceive that only one course would be adopted by those who had clear ideas upon the nature of the disease, and whose fears and prejudices did not interfere with the proper exercise of their judgment, namely, at once to remove all hands from the ship, (for the ship may contain within itself the cause of the disease,)* and to place the crew in such a condition, that all sufficient medical and hygienic means may be adopted for the recovery of the sick and the prevention of the further extension of the disease. This is not to be done by removing the men from one ship to another, from a sphere of bodily and mental activity to one of imprisonment in a hulk; for as on the cessation of excitement at the end of a campaign the soldier falls ill, so the latent germs of fever in this case are sure to be developed from the cessation of all bodily and mental stimuli. I consider the later deaths that took place amongst the crew of the 'Eclair' to have resulted from this pernicious and cowardly system. No; the method that humanity and good sense dictates, is that of at once removing the men into hospital, making a lazaretto of the same perhaps, but provided

with sufficient exercising grounds for affording recreation and amusement to those whom it may be thought necessary to keep for a time under surveillance.

I beg to call your attention to the recent order in council, respecting ships arriving from the coast of Africa, where "the revenue officers and others, at all outports and stations along the coast, are to report the arrival of any ship having any illness on board, it being the desire of the government to take every precaution against the spread of so alarming a disease." Now, if these unfortunate ships (if any should arrive) are to be kept in the isolated condition that the 'Eclair' has been made to occupy, until despair and disease attack the healthy portion of their crews, then I say a greater disgrace to medical science and to humanity could not be perpetrated. The following appeared in the papers of October 31:—

"The officers and crew of the unfortunate 'Eclair' are once more permitted to have intercourse with the shore; there are yet several on the sick list suffering from the effects of the fever, but all who are unable to be paid off will be sent to Melville Hospital."

So that, after all, it appears that the sick are sent into hospital, where, it is my belief, if they had been sent at first many valuable lives would have been saved.

I hope you will not cease to direct your attention to this subject, for your journal is powerful in forming public opinion on medical subjects; and that you will not allow the bugbear of African, or any other fever, to be a sanction for a system of error and cruelty, which engenders what it is intended to destroy.

I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

WOTTON ISAACSON.

Huntingdon, Nov. 13th, 1845.

THE DICTUM OF THE POOR-LAW COMMISSIONERS REGARDING THE VACCINATION FEE IN THE BRENTFORD UNION.

New Brentford, Dec. 18, 1845.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—I beg to inform you that the Board of Guardians having received a recent communication from the Poor-law Commissioners, informing them that, taking into consideration the circumstances of this Union, and the rate of payment in other Unions similarly circumstanced as respects area and population, they are disposed to think that 1s. 6d. per case successfully vaccinated is a fair rate of remuneration to the vaccinators of the Brentford Union. The Board therefore direct me to inform you, that after the 25th inst., the reduction to 1s. 6d. per case will come into operation.

I am, Sir, your most obedient servant,

To H. G. Day, Esq., Isleworth.

G. CLARK, Clerk.

(OFFICIAL.)

MR. LISTON'S OPINION OF THE OPERATION OF LITHECTACY.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—May I beg the early admission of a few remarks on the opinion expressed in Mr. Liston's last Surgical Lecture, (LANCET, Dec. 14th,) respecting the plan which has been proposed of removing urinary calculus from the male, by the slow and painless dilatation of the posterior part of the urethra and neck of the bladder?

This opinion is evidently founded on a complete misapprehension of the nature of the new operation; and being expressed by a surgeon of Mr. Liston's deservedly high character, it might, if uncontradicted, have the effect of delaying the introduction of a valuable substitute for the dangerous and painful operations at present in use.

Although he does not expressly state why he objects to this operation, it may be gathered from his remarks that he deems it liable to the same objections that have been made to the operation of lithotomy *en deux temps*. Now, without admitting that this would constitute a material objection to lithectacy, in comparison with the other operations, it must be conceded that a very unnecessary incision of the external parts, preliminary to the dilatation, has been made in some of the cases in which it has been performed; but such an incision has not been recommended by the writer of the able and philosophical work alluded to by Mr. Liston. On the contrary, he speaks significantly and truly of the required incision as being "a mere scratch." And were Sir James Earle's double staff to be used, (as I have already mentioned in a paper on this subject in THE LANCET, August, 1843,) a larger incision in the perinæum need not be made than

* A boatswain's mate, employed in cleaning out the hold of the 'Eclair,' caught the fever.