CONFERENCE OF SANITARY INSPECTORS.

ADDRESS

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PRESIDENT OF THE CONFERENCE.

(ASSOCIATE.)

IN welcoming the Sanitary Inspectors of Great Britain to this Conference, on behalf of The Sanitary Institute, I am sensible that I am not selected for this honour on account of my own personal merit, but probably by reason of marks of confidence bestowed upon me by my official colleagues in the past, and I am conscious of my own inability to do justice to the occasion. This year I regard as a year of jubilee. Last year the nation was filled with the halo and sentiment of a royal jubilee, which inspired the poet, the painter, and the rhetorician to exhaust their powers of imagination in ascriptions of praise and loyalty to the head of the State. The jubilee this year for us is prosaic, solid, matter-of-fact—*omnia sanitas*. It is true Charles Kingsley has suggested that a poet will arise to write an epic upon sanitary reform, but a high standard of literary and poetic brilliancy and imagery is not indicated by the suggested first line,

“Smells and the man I sing.”

The year 1848, with its Public Health Act, stands out as a landmark in our English history, and we may be pardoned for celebrating its jubilee to-day. It is customary in all associations of life to note such occasions, and we may I think justly consider briefly the Inspector's share in the past and future of sanitation.

It is unnecessary to recapitulate the conditions existing fifty years ago; they are too well known to all of you already. But in considering the work that has been done since, I should like to refer to one or two facts mentioned by Chadwick in his reports on the condition of the labouring classes.

Mr. Thomas Porter, Surgeon to St. Botolph's, Bishopsgate District, being asked if the poor people in his district had w.c.'s

provided, said "No, only common necessities, which are usually allowed to run over before they are emptied; and it is impossible to enter the tenements without being assailed by the disagreeable and unhealthy effluvia thence arising."

"Within the City itself have you perceived the same effluvia on passing the gratings of sewers?"

"Frequently; it is so general that no particular place is distinguished as being free from it."

He also expressed the following opinion: "The carelessness of the people themselves is also deplorable, as it operates very injuriously to their health and comfort. The floors of their rooms, the passages, stairs, and landings are often suffered to remain unwashed for weeks and months, and the walls and ceilings are seldom cleaned or whitened; so that with filthiness of one kind and another they present an appearance of wretchedness beyond all description."

Now these are expressions of facts existing fifty years ago, but do we not all know that they describe accurately things now existing? Could we not, any one of us, go and put our finger almost any day on such a condition? Are there not large towns, and cities, some of which have spent scores and even hundreds of thousands of pounds of money in beautifying their towns and erecting magnificent palaces for the City fathers to deliberate in, which have still, after the knowledge and agitation of fifty years, existing in their midst such abominations as alluded to in the first answer given above?

In the year 1846 the nauseous effluvia emitted from the sewers was of sufficient urgency to engage the attention of the Royal Institute of British Architects, and at one of their meetings in that year Mr. Toynbee opened a discussion thereon, and suggested the use of gas-burners in tall shafts for the purpose of getting rid of the trouble. Still we have the trouble with us, forming one of the most constant sources of anxiety to those engaged in managing our sewers, and the settlement of which we do not appear to be within sight of.

There is no denying that in these and similar directions we have not made the advance that was expected when the first sanitary Acts were passed. Why is this? It appears to me that there are two reasons which in a self-governing country like ours have paramount influence. They are these:—

Firstly: The people immediately concerned have not been sufficiently impressed with the seriousness of the need for advancement.

Secondly: They have not had the power under the law to see that their wishes in the matter were complied with.

It has been acknowledged from the first that those who

suffered most from insanitation were the poorest of our people, inasmuch as besides their exposure to the evils which were the result of neglect on the part of owners of property or local authorities, they were the victims of their own carelessness and ignorance, as indicated by Mr. Parsons in his evidence given above.

As knowledge on the question has spread, so has the demand for power to deal with it increased; as the people have learnt the possibility of remedy so has the cry for improvement strengthened. There may still be a few who regard all disease as inevitable; it is not many years since I was remonstrated with for presuming to interfere in the work of Providence by requiring an owner of property to remedy defects in order to prevent the spread of disease, but the laws of health are more "understood of the people," and in that is our great hope of their ultimate triumph.

When the Health of Towns Association were making an exhaustive inquiry into the subject, their Liverpool friends replied that "the secret history of the working of our Act has proved that no law for the health of the people can be safely intrusted to a merely irresponsible Local Board."

There was much truth in that statement then, and we inspectors have some of us had painful personal experience of its truth down to recent times. But why was it? The Boards were composed of those who had interest in not being compelled to spend money, and their constituents, those who voted them upon those bodies, had interests in the same direction. Our Liverpool friends correctly described the position at that time, but they did not foresee what we have lived to see, the time when the conditions are inverted. When the people most immediately concerned help to compose the authorities, and have sufficient electoral power to compel from all parties a recognition of their needs, and the admission that the expenditure of money, even in large sums, upon the securing of perfect sanitary requirements is not simply an expenditure out of the pockets of one class for the benefit of another, but a common charge for the common good.

If the people concerned are increasingly becoming aware of the urgency of these questions to them, as undoubtedly they are, inspectors can claim a very large share in the work of spreading among them that knowledge. We must of necessity be in advance of general opinion. Apart from our individual enthusiasms, the very necessities of our position and work push us along, and make us, have made us missionaries of sanitation. We have not always been chosen for our courtesy, sweet reasonableness, possession of the *suaviter in modo* temperament,

we are much the same as the mass of our fellows in those respects; we have not invariably been selected for our superior special acquaintance with the laws of health, but as a body we have been just that distance in front of general opinion which our work necessitates, and which the sense of the community demands and will allow. Here and there, however, there have been opportunities, or needs for an emergence from the mass, and there have generally been the men there for the purpose.

"The necessity of a complete and accurate system of registering disease both fatal and otherwise, will at some future time be admitted by advocates of sanitary progress to be the alphabet of sanitary science. Without a correct knowledge of the history and specific intensity of diseases, it is impossible to expect complete success to attend our efforts to prevent the spread of even filth diseases. To be acquainted with the diseases of the district in their entirety; to be able to point out the special localities of special diseases; to be able to give the specific intensity of diseases connected with sex, age, occupation, modes of life, and the external influences by which people are affected, is to enable the sanitary student to determine without doubt the true predisposing causes of disease. That the sanitary operations of the future will be placed upon this basis I have not the smallest doubt. I believe the day will come when the contents of the vital statistical record of the town will be deemed to be the best historic reference relating to the inner life, health, and therefore the wealth of the people of Leek." This is an extract from a report in the year 1856, by our honoured colleague Mr. R. Farrow, of Leek, and shows an absolute grasp of the fundamental principles of sanitary science, the application of which under his direction prepares us for the statement that after thirty years' work his town shows a decrease in the sickness and mortality rates of 30 per cent., and a corresponding increase in the average length of life of 30 per cent. No wonder that our aged friend says, and we join with him: "Some glory in the number of lives and the amount of property they have destroyed; we glory in having been instrumental in the saving of life and diminishing of human suffering."

Twenty-five years ago the attention of Mr. H. Alexander was directed to the foul conditions under which the supply and storage of water in the houses in the parish of Shoreditch were carried out. He describes how the supply was turned on twenty or thirty minutes three times a week, and a bag was tied over the ball-cock to prevent small fish, and the larger impurities, from entering the cistern; the cisterns were over or in w.c.'s, in or under bed-rooms; often with filth, dead animals, or masses

of fungus in them. Grasping at once the crux of the position, he persistently brought it under the notice of the authorities, and at last earned the gratitude of the inhabitants by obtaining that constant supply which is recognised as a *sine quâ non* of perfectly healthy conditions.

Another and more recent instance of the inspector (in the person of Mr. Alexander) being in advance of the general opinion may be seen in his lengthy controversy with the London School Board on the question of substituting separate w.c.'s for trough closets in their schools. In a few years to come it will be barely conceivable that any responsible body could persist in exposing the children under their control to the conditions inseparable from the use of the trough closet—conditions to which they would not expose their own families—and which are only submitted to at all because they are not quite so bad as, are some improvement on, the old privy or pan. The reports which the teachers have supplied to the Board on the experience of the use of the w.c. system have been thoroughly satisfactory, and have resulted in an extension of their use—a fact upon which all those who look upon our schools as to be from all points of view educational in the fullest and best sense, will unhesitatingly congratulate our friend.

It is an inherent necessity with all reformers to have a Utopia to ponder on and to desire. Some are content with Bacon to dream of it and write about it; some, like Feargus O'Connor and Owen, to try and get it into being; we combine the two.

Our great apostle, Sir B. W. Richardson, drew the picture of it, and following in the industrious and never-faltering footsteps of our revered leader, we will work for the ultimate completion of the City of Hygeia. While trying to foresee its plan and method of construction, he with the insight of a true reformer recognised that it must be founded on the free will of the inhabitants—

“Broad based upon the people's will.”

It is to be “a *community* so circumstanced and so maintained by the exercise of its own free will, guided by scientific knowledge, that in it the perfection of sanitary results will be approached if not actually realised, in the co-existence of the lowest possible general mortality with the highest possible individual longevity.”

The details which he sketched have nowhere been realised in more than one or two items, and those only in the houses of the well-to-do, while with reference to a few others we are tending

in their direction. To uproot the habits and inherited tendencies of nations is a work for Hercules or for time. We can only proceed a step at a time. With all our shortcomings and defects, we have undoubtedly taken many steps. Similar incontrovertible facts to those given by Mr. Farrow, of Leek, can be related as to many of our towns and cities. We are rapidly approaching this lowest possible general mortality, and persistent work on the lines already laid down in our health laws must bring about the desired end.

Our work is not yet finished. In the early days the Health of Towns' Association, when urging the need for sanitary reform, were met with the objection that a large and expensive force of officials would be required to enforce and superintend. To overcome this objection they suggested that "whensoever the proposed local consolidations were effected, and complete works laid down and put in action, public servants by whom the work and consequent pecuniary savings and savings of life and health have been effected, will have comparatively little to do and may change their sphere of action." Well, the end is not yet. Where is the district in which the staff is so sufficient that it is able fully and completely to deal with the work required by the various Acts of Parliament?

Public Health Acts, Housing of the Working Classes Acts, Adulteration Acts, Infectious Disease Acts, Factory and Workshop Acts, passed year after year, piling Pelion upon Ossa, make the work of sanitary inspection grow to mountainous proportions, and the need for more inspectors grow at a pace far greater than the willingness of the authorities to increase their numbers. This with the greater demand by the people in requiring attention to details where formerly only gross defects were troubled about by them, due to the greater refinement resulting from truer opinion, will put off indefinitely the day above referred to, when we may rest on our laurels. We have need then to cry to the people "Come over and help us." Do your part in those matters in which the individual can act, we will attend to those things the Community must do.

We have then in the future to follow up the work of the past. We have to keep well in advance of the general opinion of our districts. Not to wait to be told what to do, but to point out to others what needs to be done, to lead the way, to explain, to reason, to be missionaries of health. It is said authoritatively that what is required most at the present time is not legislation but education, and there is undoubtedly much truth in that saying. Could we have each individual in the state made to realize his own duty in these matters by personal conviction, doubtless we should be nearly approaching perfection. But we

cannot forget that the law is, at any rate at present, a powerful factor in the education of a vast number of people; to know that a certain thing must be done, helps to prove to them that it should be done, and lead them to enquire the reason why; and until every one is actuated by disinterested desire for the general good, until it is no longer possible for any person to make a profit out of the evil conditions which injure others, legislation, drastic and deterrent will be necessary.

Be it our work then, day by day, in season and out of season, to continue our share in the educating of those most immediately concerned in the understanding of that watchword, "Cleanliness," in the full meaning of which is comprised all our sanitary measures; confident that when we have enabled all to understand the duties which it imposes upon them, we shall have secured that approach to the perfection of sanitary science which our prophet foresaw.

The great demand at present, the great need is air, pure air; much has been done to secure good drainage, pure food, pure water, but most remains to be done to give the people pure air. The overcrowding of the people is the most crying evil, and that which is perhaps the most difficult to deal with. It is exceedingly doubtful if the most zealous efforts of the best equipped sanitary authority in great towns can make the slightest real impression upon the amount of overcrowding existing within its borders. The poor people may be driven from room to room, from street to street, or to an adjoining district, but with a greater number of people compelled to live within a certain area than the houses of that area will legally accommodate, overcrowding is inevitable.

One inevitable outcome of the desire to improve upon these conditions has been the application to them of the moral axiom, "there is always room at the top," by the erection of tenement dwellings of many stories in height. Even where these have been erected under good supervision, it is very doubtful whether we are not hindering the acquirement of the essential condition of life, pure air. It is, however, a first essential in a vast city like London to do our best, first to modify the bad conditions, in default of ability entirely to remove them, and really well designed tenements would undoubtedly help to that end.

It has been suggested by ardent reformers that a system of free transport to the suburbs for those who work in the City would help to remedy the evil; others would impress upon us the iniquity of the existing land laws, which enable the owner of land in cities to take advantage of the necessities of his fellows for his own aggrandisement; others see in the utili-

sation of the water power of our rivers for electric force the decentralisation of our manufacturing operations, and lessening of attraction to our great towns. Without the necessity for our attaching ourselves as a body to any one of these policies, or of the many others which are held before us, we may individually and collectively use our influence to impress upon the body politic our conviction that every step that can be taken, every road opened, to provide for the people of our towns the pure air and sunlight which are an essential condition of healthy life, is a step towards the maintenance of our position amongst the nations of the earth, whether it be as a manufacturing nation, a controller of the seas, or as a leader in the moral, intellectual, and religious life of the world.