THE Journal of the American Medical Association.

EDITED UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY.

VOL. XII.

CHICAGO, MAY 4, 1889.

No. 18.

ORIGINAL ARTICLES.

THE REMEDY FOR OVERCROWDING IN THE MEDICAL PROFESSION.

Read before the St. Clair County (Ills.) Medical Society, Dec. 6, 1888.

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That the medical profession is overcrowded, is a fact of the gravest import, recognized by physicians everywhere. The lamented Dr. Garnett, in his address as President of the American Medical Association, devoted his entire paper to an earnest and able discussion of this evil, and to suggestions for its abatement. State associations, district and county societies, current medical periodicals and individual physicians, both here and abroad, are manifesting the liveliest concern in the solution of the problem, which is everywhere increasing in importance.

Before proceeding to discuss remedial measures for a recognized evil, let us first consider the essential nature of the disease which we wish to combat. What constitutes an overcrowding in the ranks of the medical profession? How large may be the ratio of physicians to total population without exceeding a reasonable and natural proportion?

We know that in the United States there are more doctors to the 10,000 of general population than in any other country in the world; and yet it may reasonably be doubted if the average income received by American physicians is less than that enjoyed by medical men abroad. On the contrary, it seems to be a well ascertained fact that the average, both of medical fees and of the incomes of medical practitioners in this country, exceeds that prevailing in any other country on the globe. And the cause of this is not far to seek. The average prosperity of the whole people of this country exceeds that of any other people in the world; and doctors, like all other citizens who labor for a livelihood, receive their proportionate share of the prosperity or poverty of the particular country in which they live. In Great Britain there are fewer doctors to the 10,000 of total population than with us, and on the continent of Europe a still smaller ratio, yet this fact does

not give the average medical practitioner abroad any advantage in point of professional income, over his American brother. For, though his patients be more numerous, yet the poverty of the masses of the people, among whom he practices his profession, compels him to accept lower fees and a smaller total income.

It is manifest, therefore, that where prosperity prevails among the people a larger proportionate number of physicians may enjoy comfortable incomes than where the people are steeped in poverty. Were *all* the citizens of the United States sufficiently prosperous to be able to pay reasonable fees for medical services, who could then say that we have too many doctors? But if our citizens, on the contrary, were as largely sunken in the depths of poverty as are the masses of the people on the continent of Europe, who could then deny that the American medical profession would be overcrowded, even though half its number were blotted out of existence within twenty-four hours? For the sake of argument imagine nine-tenths of the citizens of this country to be in the possession of incomes sufficiently ample to purchase the satisfaction of all the material desires incident to modern civilization, and he would be a bold man who should then declare the medical profession to be overcrowded, even were the existing ratio of physicians to general population in the United States doubled, trebled or, indeed, quadrupled.

The criterion, then, by which we may determine when the profession is overcrowded, is not alone the ratio of physicians to total population, but this ratio *taken in connection with the degree of poverty or of prosperity prevailing among the masses*. Bearing this conclusion in mind, we are now in position to consider the remedies which have been offered for the abatement of the universally recognized evil, which is now everywhere under discussion.

Many plans have been proposed for remedying the evil, and many have been tested; but none has yet been presented which on trial has proved to be efficacious. So far as I have observed, every plan which has hitherto been recommended has for its first aim such extension of the course of medical study preliminary to acquiring a diploma, and such elevation of the standard of ex-

aminations prerequisite to securing a license to practice, as would be calculated to deter many medical students of limited financial resources from entering on so difficult and expensive a pursuit; and induce them rather to choose some easier and cheaper, though possibly even more overcrowded avenue, than the practice of medicine, in which to seek honor, reputation and a livelihood.

But if stringent laws, regulating the course of study and the qualifications for practice, could solve the problem of an overcrowded profession, then Germany would have settled the matter long ago. Such laws do accomplish one desirable end which is good in itself; and that is, they elevate the standard of knowledge requisite to entering on the grave responsibilities of medical practice. And, in so far as they do this, they are highly to be commended. But restrictive laws and regulations, in so far as they are designed to prevent the evil of overcrowding in the ranks of the profession, "have so far," to quote the language used by President Garnett, with reference to the less stringent regulations hitherto in operation in the United States, "proved conspicuously futile." And, in the humble opinion of your essayist, restrictive laws of all kinds must, in the nature of things, continue to prove conspicuously futile to the end of time.

Why is it that there is an "almost universal desire prevailing among the working classes to become doctors and lawyers?" Why is it that "the professions of law and medicine are overcrowded?" That the statements, as made by the late President Garnett, are hardly overdrawn, will be admitted on every hand. There must be a cause for this condition of things, as there is for every other ill from which humanity suffers. And it is a rational step for medical men to seek first the cause of an evil which so vitally affects themselves, before resorting further to empirical remedies which have always hitherto proved so "conspicuously futile" in affording relief. For if an efficient cause can be found for this condition which confronts us, and if this cause can be removed, then the disease will disappear, and our problem will have received a solution at last.

That "men seek to gratify their desires with the least exertion" is a fundamental law of human nature dominating every human being. And this law has no exceptions; for should at any time an apparent exception be noted, it will on investigation, like the apparent exceptions to the physical law of gravity, but prove how invariable is the rule. If, then, the assertion that "an almost universal inclination prevails among the working classes to become doctors and lawyers" be true, or indeed but half true, it is for the simplest reason in the world, viz: Because energetic and quick-witted young men in the ranks of the working classes can, by becoming doctors and

lawyers, gratify their desires with less exertion than they would be compelled to put forth in such other pursuits and avocations as are open to them. And just as long as society is constituted as it now is, so that a given *quantum* of exertion devoted to the study and practice of medicine yields, or promises to yield, larger returns than in some other avocations, *so long will the present tendency continue* for men to gravitate from other avenues of gaining repute, respectability and a livelihood into "the business of doctoring"—I trust I may be pardoned the expression.

Germany is probably excelled by no other government in the world in the stringency of its laws regulating admission to the ranks of the medical profession. Not only is the preliminary course of study long and arduous, not only must each aspirant have passed through every successive grade of prescribed preparatory instruction, not only must he have secured the endorsement of some noble university, justly famed for the high standard of learning which its degrees imply; not alone must the aspiring youth devote many years of time and many hundreds of *thalers* to a completion of the course marked out for him by the authority of the State; but in addition to all this, even though the possessor of a university degree, he must finally pass a rigid and awe-inspiring *Staats-examen* before a government licensing board; and then, if successful in this latest ordeal, he is permitted to practice medicine within the confines of the German Empire.

As a consequence of all these stringent requirements, the medical profession of Germany leads the vanguard in the world-wide march of progress in the medical sciences. Such results certainly justify the high standard of qualification requisite for entrance into the medical profession of Germany. But, alas! even in that favored land, whose laws regulating the practice of medicine are exceeded in stringency by those of probably no other government under the sun, we are confronted with the same problem of an overcrowded medical profession, which is harrassing the minds of medical men throughout the confines of our civilization. For, as with us so also in Germany, the same widespread inclination prevails among the working classes to become doctors and lawyers. And, in spite of the highest degree of restrictive legislation which may be deemed possible or even desirable, the ranks of the learned professions are in Germany even more overcrowded than with us, if we may take as a criterion the relative fees and the average professional incomes prevailing in the two countries respectively.

The explanation of this is simple and the cause is not difficult to find. As in the United States, so also in Germany, men seek to gratify their desires with the least exertion. It requires far more exertion in Germany to obtain a license to prac-

tice medicine than is requisite in the United States, *but it is also far more difficult there than with us to earn a living in every other avocation.* And the proposition holds good for Germany, as it does also throughout the civilized world, that, as it becomes increasingly difficult for the average man of average intelligence to earn a satisfactory livelihood in all other avocations, he will lightly turn to the thought of "doctoring," with a view to bettering his condition. And it must in the future continue to be as invariably true as it now is, that so long as "the working classes" find it relatively *more* irksome and laborious to secure the gratification of their desires in other avocations than in the practice of medicine, so long will they persist in overcrowding the medical profession. Laws requiring of students the expenditure of more time and the outlay of greater effort than are now necessary to the acquirement of a license to practice medicine, should undoubtedly be enacted in our country also; because more stringent laws in this direction are manifestly needed in order to elevate the existing standards of qualification for medical practice. But, if I correctly apprehend the drift of the argument put forth in the address of President Garnett, *such laws*, if only stringent enough, *are also expected to solve the problem under discussion*, and to check the recognized tendency of the working classes to become doctors, by requiring of them *so great* exertion in the attainment of their object as to make them rather content with some other pursuit, less remunerative may be, but also far less burdensome to follow.

Restrictive legislation will not solve this problem. Its solution lies not in restriction but in freedom—freedom on the part of the working classes (including doctors) to produce wealth and secure the satisfactions of their desires by equal privilege of access to the bounties of nature. Let us beware of advocating restrictive legislation of such character as may be calculated to invite public hostility to the medical profession. Let us avoid the suspicion of seeking to build up a close trades-union, a medical guild, a professional trust, a close corporation—seeking our own advantage (it is suspected) at the expense of the public at large. Laws operating in this direction do not, and cannot, afford a solution of the problem, but rather retard its solution. The remedy which we are seeking does not consist in making it *more* difficult for "the working classes" to become doctors, *but in making it less difficult to earn an honest living in all other avocations.*

Whenever our existing taxing laws, which now levy a fine on every product of labor, and which by fining, also restrict every form of wealth production—thereby promoting the poverty of "the working classes" (including doctors)—shall be so amended as to take by taxation for public purposes those values, and those values only, which

pertain to land, irrespective of improvements; and which, being produced by the whole community, should rightfully belong to the people at large; then will every form of wealth production be unfettered, and every citizen be at liberty to earn a living by applying his labor, on equal terms with every other citizen, to nature's inexhaustible store-house of raw materials. And since the power of labor, in transmuting raw materials into wealth, has, in our own generation, been multiplied a thousand-fold by the aid of steam engines and labor-saving machinery; and because nature is lavish of her bounty, and all forms of raw material are practically inexhaustible; it follows that, if all men secure equal privilege of access to nature's inexhaustible stores, the production of wealth in all its forms will be practically limited only by the complete satisfaction of every material desire of the human heart, and the wildest dreams of avarice be more than realized, to the practical benefit of the entire human family without exception. Under such a system of taxing laws involuntary poverty will of necessity be abolished, and every man will be free and untrammelled in earning a livelihood in whatever avocation promises to secure the satisfaction of his desires with the least possible exertion.

And when this practical and far-reaching reform shall have been accomplished, by virtue of a simple change in our existing taxing laws, as I have faith to believe it shortly will be, men will not be tempted to overcrowd the medical profession, at the cost of years of irksome preparatory labor, unless they are constrained to do so by higher and nobler motives than *simply* to gratify their desires with the least exertion. And the enhanced general standard of comfort, and increased ease of earning a livelihood then prevailing among the people at large, when the existing barriers to profitable employment in other avocations shall have all been swept away, will react favorably upon the medical profession also; not only by removing the present incentives to study medicine on the part of those who are better fitted by nature for other pursuits, but by enabling many hundreds of thousands of honest men to pay adequate fees to their family physicians for services rendered, instead of, as now, seeking medical charity for very poverty's sake at some free dispensary.

Then will our problem be finally solved. But a new one of opposite tenor will spring up, a solution of which which will be called for, not by the medical profession, but by the public at large. The problem will then read, not "How shall we prevent unlearned men from gravitating toward the learned professions?" but rather "How shall the pecuniary reward be made sufficiently great, to induce men of talent to devote the years of time and labor needed to qualify them to enter upon the laborious and responsible professions of law and medicine?"