

Correspondence.

"Audi alteram partem."

BIOLOGY AND THE MEDICAL CURRICULUM.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—I should like to support strongly Mr. T. G. Hill's plea for the more efficient instruction of the medical student in biology. That medicine is a biological subject is one of those truths so plain that we are all apt to forget it. The botany and animal morphology which have become conventional since Huxley and Martin are pretty good, but Mr. Hill's idea of merging them into a sound biology is very much better. In recent years there has been a progressive degradation of the relative position of biology in the medical curriculum in London, and by a curious coincidence the importance of the general ideas of biology to medicine has become increasingly obvious. The central point of pathology is adaptation, and on the whole I should say that no idea seems to be more novel to the average medical student in his third or fourth year. Yet it is pretty nearly the central point of biology as well, though I daresay I have some pathological prejudice as to this.

But let the student be taught biology, and not just the odds and ends which his teacher imagines will be useful to him as a medical man. There is nothing really very scandalous in the pathologist who did not recognise a spiral vessel so long as he knew who to worry for the solution of his difficulties. Knowing where to look for a thing is very nearly as good as knowing it off-hand. The principle of the relations of plants to one another and to their environment is the sort of general notion which will be of permanent and insistent value in the business at which the student is to spend his life. And if a more effective teaching of biology is necessary, it is equally impossible to cram anything more into the curriculum. If biology is to have more room it must be at the expense of some other subject. Chemistry is the most obvious victim; it is not a particularly educative subject, and as the key which we have been so often told is to undo all our troubles it has seemed to work rather stiffly. A good many people seem nowadays to be thinking that biological problems are best tackled by biological methods.

I am, Sir, yours faithfully,

Radlett, Feb. 17th, 1919.

A. E. BOYCOTT.

MEDICINE, PARLIAMENT, AND PUBLIC.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—In view of Sir Henry Morris's plea in your issue of Feb. 1st, of the turbulent meeting in Wigmore Hall on Feb. 9th, and of Dr. Addison's meeting in which he expounded some of his proposals for the Ministry of Health, may an old advocate of such a Ministry and a political candidate of 13 years' standing make a few suggestions?

The demands and rights of the profession cannot be authoritatively expressed by any body which will be qualified to contribute the special knowledge and experience of the profession to the conduct of the public services. The latter requires a specially selected body, such as the Medical Parliamentary Committee, or else the medical corporations and institutions themselves, to give expert advice. It will be the duty of the Minister of Health, with the help of his advisory councils, to attach relative weight to such advice, according to its internal or external evidence of importance. No democratically elected "Medical Parliament" could take over this function, nor would such a body be free from the necessity, where medical rights were at stake, of unconsciously subordinating its other recommendations to the defence of such rights. A medical trade union may or may not be necessary for such defence, but its advice to the State would be suspect. We must contribute advice that is not suspect. The two objects must be treated separately, and it is my own opinion that the existing corporations and institutions are able to give the advice required for the second and more general object. The Medical Parliamentary Committee may help as a clearing-house, but its authority will be indirect, voluntary, partial, and the work of such a body rests on a few men who have many claims on their time and energies.

The main requirement is to watch closely the statutory machinery to be set up in connexion with the proposed Ministry, to help it, scientifically to criticise it, and to bring weight to bear in Parliament to secure efficiency and prevent mistakes. For this purpose efficient Parliamentary representatives, medical or lay, are essential; and if the Medical Parliamentary Committee succeeds in putting effective representatives into Parliament and on to local authorities it will provide the only effective influence on behalf of medical science in public business.

It is too often overlooked that a Member of Parliament must primarily represent a constituency and not any profession, science, or other particular interest. He represents his constituents in all the proceedings, great or small, in which they or any of them may be concerned within the ambit of Parliament or of any Government department. And throughout he holds a brief for the particular policy or attitude of the political association that supported his candidature. It is only subject to these considerations that he can make use of his medical experience—and he will not find it of much help towards his election.

It is for lack of these considerations that the medical profession, as compared especially with the legal, is so weakly represented in Parliament. Quite apart from party, politics is a subject of great complexity, and requires no smattering, but a sound knowledge and a strenuous, practical experience. Without this equipment few candidates will be elected and none will exercise any considerable power in the counsels of Parliament. There, as in private practice, the most convincing facts, the soundest advice, are useless unless conveyed to the proper person, at the proper time, in the proper way, and in the proper place; and then they must be driven home with the aid of every direct or adventitious force that can be summoned to their aid. If a few of our best men, at the outset of their qualified career, instead of devoting their spare time to coaching and other by-play, will devote all their energies to this subject, as do many young lawyers, the medical profession may then confidently expect to play some part in the Government of the nation comparable with that which, despite all criticism, has on the whole so worthily been played by the legal profession and other sections of the community.

I am, Sir, yours faithfully,

F. E. FREMANTLE,

Lieutenant-Colonel, R.A.M.C., T.F.

Queensberry-place, S.W., Feb. 19th, 1919.

STATE MEDICAL SERVICE: A COMPARISON WITH THE MILITARY PATTERN.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—A good deal has been written for and against a State Medical Service. The subject continues to be discussed from diverse points of view, and in support of the argument for such a service and of the lines on which it should be framed the Army Medical Service has been much quoted. Again, the proposed civil service has been discussed in a manner which makes it evident that some regard its adoption as necessarily involving the disappearance of the general practitioner, and that the survival or suppression of general practice is the crux of the whole business. The medical service of the Army does not make provision for some needs that amongst the civil population a medical service must provide for, and though in general the military could serve as a model for the civil service, they must necessarily differ in some detail. While the Army Medical Service is organised with a view to removal of the sick and injured to central hospitals, and treatment "in quarters" by visiting medical officers is made the exception, among the civil population the reverse holds good, the majority of sick persons being treated in their homes ("in quarters") and but comparatively few in hospital. It is not feasible, with advantage, to alter the position materially in either case. The medical officer to a regimental unit (e.g., a battalion of infantry) may be taken as the equivalent of the general practitioner of civil practice, but he does not retain under his care any but those who are suffering from quite trivial ailments which do not unfit them for some form of duty. In times of peace regimental units do not ordinarily have a medical officer attached to them. A system is adopted for dealing with the sick or injured soldier which resolves itself