

sort of compliment, coming, as it does, from an anonymous panegyrist. Sir, I now beg to take my final leave of your veracious correspondent, and I am firmly convinced, that if you follow my example, you will not, in the slightest degree, injure the reputation, or compromise the interests, of *THE LANCET*.

I have the honour to remain, your obedient servant,

A. ELLIS.

110, Stephen's-green, Oct. 12, 1844.

# BIRMINGHAM GENERAL HOSPITAL.

## THE PRUSSIC ACID CASE.—LETTER FROM MR. GUTTERIDGE.

To the Editor of *THE LANCET*.

SIR,—In your number of the 12th inst. you refer to a statement of mine, impugning the Rev. Peyton Blakiston's medical competency; and you also quote a passage from a letter lately published by Mr. Ledsam, particularizing the circumstances of the case of chorea treated with prussic acid by the reverend gentleman in the General Hospital, at Birmingham; and you pertinently ask, "*Is this statement true or false?*"

The letter purporting to be written by the house-surgeon, Mr. Freer, furnished you by the reverend gentleman himself, and printed in your last number, contains admissions confirmatory of the statement of Mr. Ledsam and myself.

It is said that "the medicine was *only two-thirds* of the strength stated." I must remark, that there is no proof of this, but rather the contrary; for the dispenser says, the strength of the "acid in use at the hospital is rather above one and three quarters—two being the pharmacopœial strength." I have reason, however, to doubt the correctness of the statement equally of the house-surgeon and the dispenser. I understand that the strength of the medicine which the patient took *was never ascertained at all!*

It is said by the house-surgeon, that "thirty-five drops is the smallest dose ever known to have proved fatal." On this I observe, that the patient in the present case was a weakly boy, and that it is therefore not surprising that he should die from taking a quantity of prussic acid *only one-seventh* less than that admitted to have proved fatal in another case.

The prussic acid in use at the hospital is presumed to be of the strength directed by the London Pharmacopœia. The medicine actually used was therefore either of *that* strength, or it was, as stated by the house-surgeon and the dispenser, considerably weaker. If the latter, the druggist who supplies the hospital committed a fraud upon the institution, by supplying an inferior article, and misleading the medical men in estimating the remedial strength of the acid. If the former—as it may have been, and probably was—then *thirty* drops, of the pharmacopœial strength, were really administered: hence the fatal result.

"A doubt having arisen as to the instructions given, I thought it better," says Mr. Freer, "not to increase the dose, although I had no misgivings about the case." I understand that a doubt *did* so far arise as to the instructions given, that the reverend gentleman was sent to, and asked again what his orders were as to the quantity, the interval, and the augmentation of the dose. He expressly ordered, I am informed—and as Mr. Ledsam relates—"TEN DROPS EVERY TWO HOURS, AND INCREASE THE DOSE FIVE DROPS EVERY TIME!" Again, a doubt arose in the mind even of the dispenser; for it is stated, that in his astonishment at the enormity of the dose, he asked Mr. Hodgson, who happened to be in the hospital at the time, whether he should prepare and send the medicine to the patient, as his reverence had directed. "*Yes,*" said Mr. Hodgson, "*if you wish to be sent to Warwick*"—meaning Warwick GAOL—for what Mr. Hodgson seems to have considered the impending manslaughter. Mr. Freer says he "had no misgivings about the case." Why, then, did he not administer the dose ordered—repeatedly ordered—by the reverend physician?

Mr. Freer further says, "The dose had occasionally been administered in the hospital, without having been attended with the slightest injury." I believe myself that no such dose was ever administered in the hospital, except after the patient had been inured to the medicine, and the dose *gradually* and *cautiously* increased.

Mr. Freer says, "Three quarters of an hour is the longest time a person has been known to survive who has been fatally affected," (by prussic acid, it is to be presumed Mr. Freer means.) An experiment of Coullon, a very high authority on this matter, has shewn that animal life may be continued at least *nineteen hours* after the subject "has been fatally affected." As to there having been intervals of "two hours" between the ten-drop doses, the fact, if so, is not very important; for in a dog, the particular subject of Coullon's experiment, death ensued *full nineteen hours* "after the last (perhaps the only) dose had been given." The analogy of the case of men and dogs is sufficiently close, on this point, to warrant the conclusion, that prussic acid is not always

*suddenly* fatal. The question as to the *convulsive* effects of prussic acid, administered after such short intervals as "two hours," becomes, therefore, more important in estimating the potency of this scarcely-manageable agent.

Mr. Freer declares, "that no dose of medicine was ordered or administered which was not fully justified by the nature of the case, and that no injurious effects whatever were produced by it." On this subject, the house-surgeon is a much better authority than the reverend physician. He exercised, undoubtedly, a sound discretion in not administering prussic acid, as Dr. Blakiston prescribed it: first dose, *ten* drops; second dose, *fifteen* drops; third dose, *twenty* drops; and so on, increasing. Nevertheless, the administration of *thirty* drops in *four* hours, was followed by death "twelve hours after the last dose." How many hours short of twelve might the patient have survived had the house-surgeon implicitly followed the reverend gentleman's directions?

Mr. Freer's letter, wherein he feels "called upon to state" this case, was obtained by a reverend brother of the Rev. Peyton Blakiston. This assumption by the Rev. James Prince Lee, Head Master of King Edward's Free Grammar School, of the office of inquisitor and advocate also, is as unwarranted by the hospital laws as it is otherwise indecent and improper. No person, whether a governor or not, is allowed to inspect the physician's prescription book without leave of the medical officers.\* How much less, then, may a governor, and especially one not a member of the managing committee, interrogate the confidential medical officer residing in the hospital, and publish statements? Let it not, however, be supposed that this letter is entitled to implicit belief, even as it relates to alleged matters of fact. The printed "Report," published "by order of the general meeting," under the direction of the same Rev. Mr. Lee and Mr. George Barker, an attorney, who had taken a leading part in the unlawful doings at the hospital, is *false* in several essential respects. There are perversions or suppressions of the truth, and also evidences of tampering with the letter ascribed to Mr. Baker, the *late* house-surgeon, on a most important matter of fact, which entitle me to say that full credence may not safely be given to anything that has here been printed under the authority of Mr. Lee and Mr. Barker; I therefore take the liberty of saying that the statements in the letter, ostensibly written by Mr. Freer, may not be trusted, and that the facts of the case, as now admitted by Dr. Blakiston himself, while they establish, as I have endeavoured to shew they do, that the treatment in this instance was, as I have called it, "unjustifiable;" that conduct so rash and dangerous warranted me in publicly calling upon him, in the name of the medical profession, to tamper no longer with human life, and to betake himself again, with all speed, to the performance of the duties that lawfully devolve upon him as a clergyman.

I beg you will do me the favour to print this letter, with my name and address, in the next number of *THE LANCET*, and I remain, sir, your obliged and obedient servant,

THOMAS GUTTERIDGE.

Colmore-row, Birmingham, Oct. 22, 1844.

## EDUCATION OF THE SONS OF THE FACULTY.

To the Editor of *THE LANCET*.

SIR,—I feel confident there is not a member of our profession who does not owe a deep debt of gratitude to Mr. Martin for the disinterested manner in which his motion, relative to the education of the sons of medical men, was brought forward at the meeting of the Provincial Medical Association, held at Northampton, last month, and there can be no doubt of its meeting with the cordial support of the profession generally. In your late leading article upon this subject, you justly applaud the necessity of a sound preliminary education, and apply much blame for the deficiency to the apprenticeship required by the London Apothecaries' Company. Though we must all complain of the system pursued by that body, yet we must recollect that in Ireland a seven years' servitude is required previous to the candidate offering himself for examination to practise as an apothecary, which said seven years must be subsequent to his passing the very extensive classical examination required for an apprentice—an examination comprising not only Greek and Latin, but French, Euclid, and algebra, the only bar to which is, "that the candidate must be fifteen years of age," so that in Ireland we doubt not the capability of the candidate, but prevent his entering on the profession too young; should the youth not succeed at this examination, he is, like at that of master, sent back for six months.

I would therefore suggest that, in addition to other plans of medical reform, a mode should be adopted requiring all candidates, previous to entering upon the medical or surgical profes-

\* This statement *must* be erroneous.—ED. L.