

Correspondence.

"Audialteram partem."

PROPOSED COLLEGE OF MEDICAL ASSISTANTS.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

Sir,—Will you kindly afford me an opportunity of replying to some remarks in THE LANCET of the 18th inst., occasioned by a former letter of mine. I am aware Mr. Lara charges an assistant one guinea commission for giving him the address of a surgeon requiring one. I have, however, a letter from an agent before me, in which he states his charge is 2s. 6d. registration fee, 2s. 6d. after arrangements are made, and five per cent. commission upon the first year's salary. I am an unqualified assistant, and can produce several letters received *this year*, offering £25 and £30 with board and lodging, for visiting, dispensing, attending midwifery, posting books, &c., and a friend of mine is now receiving £20 for the same duties. Of all the surgeons in England who keep assistants, Mr. Lara speaks of 140 only who will give £35, but admits that others have refused to give it. For my own part I have never received less than £30, but find it useless to ask more. Was I not, therefore, warranted in making the statement I did? I know Mr. Lara to be a highly respectable man, and must beg him to remember that I am not blaming *individuals* but *a system*.

A word to Unus Alter. As he admits that in consequence of the expenses and difficulties met with by an assistant out of employment he sometimes accepts a lower salary than he could otherwise command, I cannot rest assured that no one in London will compete against me for the paltry stipend. The number who answer an advertisement, and the terms they ask, prove he is mistaken. I am ready to give up dreaming, and with him put my shoulder to the wheel, thus proving our efficiency. But if we are to bicker between ourselves we shall lose the object; we must either seek unitedly, or soon prove our proposed college an impossibility. If you, Sir, will receive our names, *pro temp*, I shall be happy to give you mine. Will your other correspondents do the same? or do they prefer accepting Mr. Lara's offer? I will join either; and, Sir, if you would give us a little of your advice, you would be rendering us material benefit, and encouraging a body of men who, while they wish to do as they would be done by, are striving for more attention to the *sum cuique*.

I am, Sir, yours obediently,

QUARTUS.

June, 1853.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—As an assistant of some years' standing, permit me to make a few observations upon the proposition of your Wigan correspondent, and on the letters of "W. D." and "Unus Alter."

There can scarcely be a doubt that an association of medical assistants might, under proper management, be capable of conferring great benefit upon its members, and not on them only, but on their employers also, and on the public generally.

Commendable as the general object of the scheme is, I cannot but think that some of its details are open to serious objection; and I would at once protest against a fundamental error which seems to me to lurk at its very root—viz., that the interests of medical assistants are in antagonism with those of the general profession. This is a mistake. We are members, though humble, of one body, to which we owe certain duties and are under certain obligations; and surely we cannot best perform and fulfil these by placing ourselves in direct opposition to its higher members. Is real and permanent benefit to be obtained by reversing the social laws which govern the relations of master and man? Looking to the history of our own time and of times past, in our own country and in others, can there be a doubt that combinations of men, acting with a view to coerce their employers, must be productive of great mischief? The purpose is not a lawful one, and shall good come out of evil? Away with the ignorant notion of a strike for wages. The remuneration of assistants must always depend on supply and demand, and on the quality of the labour brought into the market. Moreover, other elements must enter into the calculation. Assistants are of three classes—qualified, half-qualified, and unqualified. Practices, too, vary in quality and remunerativeness. Under these varied circumstances, shall assistants demand "one stated term" at which they will accept employment? A progressive salary at the best is all they can look for.

Believing, then, that medical assistants have no general interests apart from those of the profession at large, I would suggest that the co-operation of gentlemen moving in its upper ranks be sought, and that the affairs of our Association should be directed by a committee, formed, if possible, from among the teachers in the metropolitan schools.

Secondly, as to the application of the funds. If the Society is to take upon itself the burden of providing lectures and hospital practice for its uneducated members, I fear it would have more on its hands than it could ever carry out. There must be some conditions to limit the number of such applications. The mere circumstances of a completed apprenticeship and of being a member of the Society must not be the only qualification for candidature to such extraordinary assistance.

Thirdly. I would suggest that a certain portion of the funds be set apart for the establishment of fully-qualified assistants in business, by lending sums not exceeding in amount two hundred pounds, such sums to be repaid, without interest, in certain yearly instalments, the security for which to be a bond with one or more responsible sureties. The individuals so benefited to continue members of the Society.

If an association of medical assistants can be formed upon a comprehensive basis, free from class jealousies, with all its objects, benevolent and feasible, I, for one, will be an annual subscriber of two guineas, and will further its interests to the utmost of my humble abilities.

I have often been pained to read communications in your journal from ill-used, ill-paid, and hard-worked assistants. I have felt this the more that it has pleased Providence to place myself in a position the very reverse. Since qualifying I have remained in the service of the same gentleman, and during that time I have seen many assistants come and depart from this town: one committed suicide; two or more, to my knowledge, have left debts standing in the books of small tradesmen; another deserted his illegitimate offspring; and others have thrown up their engagements almost at a moment's notice. I must think that, as a body, we have evils within as well as without, and I earnestly trust that our Association would be able to bring its influence to bear both upon the one and the other.

I remain, Sir, your very obedient servant,

IOTA.

June, 1853.

TRACHEOTOMY IN EPILEPSY.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—I must again trespass upon your goodness for permission to reply to two letters, contained in THE LANCET of the 11th inst., which seem to require some note of comment on my part.

In replying to Dr. Edwards, of Cheltenham, I beg to inform him that I have said nothing, and intend to say nothing, about his operation. I spoke simply of his case, and of that only to direct attention to the want of explicitness, which want he now admits, (though he does not remedy,) by saying that it was appended hastily to what was intended to have been a separate publication.

I very much regret that I should have said anything to bring upon me such an avalanche of logic, but, as I have said it, I must get out of the scrape as well as I can. I deny, then, altogether that my words and arguments can be fairly construed as Dr. Edwards construes them. When I said "I do not for a moment deny that the violent and continued fits in Dr. Edwards' patient were caused by laryngismus and cured by tracheotomy," I did not express my belief that they were so caused and cured; indeed, in the very next sentence, I went on to "contend that no proof of this is given." Therefore, so far as I can see, there is no inconsistency in my having read a paper on the "Questionable Efficacy of Tracheotomy in any kind of Epilepsy." Both expressions imply doubt, and leave a wide margin for doubt, and this Dr. Edwards would have seen if he had been less occupied in attempts to eulogize without proper premises.

I also beg to protest most emphatically against Dr. Edwards' assertion, whether conveyed "obstructively" or otherwise, that because I hesitate to receive his testimony about tracheotomy in epilepsy, I must hesitate equally in cases where the testimony of reason and experience are conjoined, as in the operations for strangulated hernia, retained urine, dislocations, and so on. Just the contrary. I hesitate in this case for the very want of what makes me believe in the others—namely, the evidence; and I assure him that I am perfectly willing to decide and believe whenever that evidence is forthcoming. Indeed, it is not for me to ask how

I could help but hesitate, when I find that the convulsions have actually returned in all the other cases of epilepsy in which tracheotomy has been performed, except in one in which the tracheal tube was worn with a cork.

Surely in a matter of this importance it is necessary to proceed with some degree of caution, and not to go on tapping human windpipes with as little compunction as beer-barrels, when, to say the least, laryngismus is a doubtful cause of epileptic convulsion and asphyxia, and when (granting Dr. Hall's views to be correct) it is by no means certain that epilepsia mitior, with the superadded risks of the operation, or even without these risks, is not quite as dangerous as epilepsia gravior. Surely it is permissible to hesitate when those best acquainted with the operation find it difficult to state succinctly what benefit they propose to gain by the operation.

In conclusion, I beg to inform Dr. Edwards that I have Mr. Anderson's authority for saying that the neck of his patient was examined after death, and that the tube was not obstructed by mucus, or in any other way. I also beg to say that the fistula in the windpipe of Dr. Verga's patient is stated to have remained free and open up to the time of death.

In replying to the next letter I have but little to say. If Mr. Clarke had stated that any unusual improvement had taken place after the operation I should not have referred to this point in the way I did, but, as he did not state it, I could, not be expected to know it. Still, Mr. Clarke's statements quoted in my former answer, "that the patient had derived but little benefit from the operation," and that "the fits recurred and continued with about the same frequency and severity as before the operation," seem to warrant me in all that I have said, and his remark upon the operation, in his last letter, "that we have not yet had sufficient experience wherewith to justify us in setting it wholly aside," confirm me in this opinion.

I regret I cannot agree with Mr. Clarke in thinking that "the noise indicating the existence of laryngismus," which he explains as having been caused by "the action of the muscles of the fauces and soft palate during violent but ineffectual efforts at inspiration," and not by stridulous breathing, can be regarded as any proof of laryngismus, inasmuch as the same noise would happen, or might happen, in any kind of interrupted breathing, and I candidly confess that I am at a loss to understand how stridulous breathing, which is a constant sign of laryngismus under other circumstances, should have been absent if laryngismus had been really present.

As to the rest, I am glad to find that Mr. Clarke admits my position, that convulsion must be obviated by tracheotomy, whether there be organic disease or not, if, as Dr. Hall lays down, laryngismus is the essential condition of convulsion. I am glad also that he regards laryngismus in the light in which I have been disposed to regard it from the beginning, and as he will find I have done if he will refer to the last two volumes of THE LANCET.

I have the honour to be, Sir,

Your very obedient servant,

C. B. RADCLIFFE, M.D.

Henrietta-street, Cavendish-square,
June, 1853.

Assistant-Physician to the
Westminster Hospital.

NECESSITY FOR A CORONER'S COURT IN SCOTLAND.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—A "Scotch Practitioner," in THE LANCET of May 14th, has published a statement relative to the want of a coroner's inquest in Scotland, unsubstantiated by reported cases, though bearing internal evidence of strict veracity. The want cannot fail to be acknowledged by all who are cognizant of such facts as have come under my own observation. I doubt not there are but few Scotch practitioners, if they would speak out, who could not report numerous cases where a well-conducted inquest would have elicited startling facts. To supply a few may direct attention to the subject, and if you can find space for them in your journal I shall feel obliged. Meanwhile I send you one, and others will follow.

I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

W. Y.

I delivered P. B.— of her fifth child on Sunday morning. The child robust and healthy, cried lustily, and in every respect promised existence. I received a message early on Monday morning that the child was dead, but the mother doing well. I

was prevented visiting her until Tuesday. The child had been buried; and after leaving the house a neighbour told me that four of her children had died in a similar manner, or at all events in a like period of time after birth, and more than hinted suspicion of "foul play." I resolved that I would watch her, if ever she came under my care again. The resolution had been communicated to the mother, and in her next pregnancy she went to the Lying-in Hospital in Edinburgh. I communicated to those under whose care the maternity then was, the facts of previous deaths and suspicions of "murder," in the hope that the woman would be watched. I heard no more of the case until the woman returned, delivered,—the child dead and buried. Again she became pregnant. She boasted that she would make no preparation for her confinement, would have no doctor to attend her, and she kept her word. She was delivered alone; a neighbour, who heard the cries of the child, went to her, and declared the child to be healthy and strong, and to present no unnatural nor unusual appearance; but ere night it was dead. I was informed of the facts, and communicated them to the Procurator Fiscal of the county, who brought a medical man with him to examine the foetus. He certified that it had died in consequence of an open foramen ovale!

Thus a female has had seven *illegitimate* children, and only one—viz., the first-born—is alive. True, we have no proof of the actual murder; but I confess it is difficult to draw an opposite inference. Has it been certainly ascertained how soon the foramen ovale closes after birth? Is a few hours sufficient to close it perfectly?

VACCINATION AT GUY'S HOSPITAL.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—As I expected, it appears that Dr. Addison is not the professed teacher of vaccination at Guy's Hospital; but Dr. Lever has already informed the public that the physician-accoucheur need not, and, in fact, does not, even so much as allude to this most important topic in his course of lectures; there is therefore no appointed teacher of vaccination at Guy's Hospital—*quod erat demonstrandum*.

I beg leave to close the correspondence.

I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

Clifton-terrace, Brighton, June, 1853.

J. A. HINGESTON.

THE REIGATE UNION AGAIN.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—It needed but that the Guardians of this Union should quibble at the payment of my account to earn for them a "high degree" in all that is contemptible. This they have done, in objecting to pay me an item of ten shillings for attending a pauper named Taylor, and a charge of two guineas for fumigating seven houses twice, on the occasion of an outbreak of fever.

There are some circumstances connected with each case which, if you will permit me, I will detail as briefly as may be. Previous to my having been suspended by this sage assembly, I had received an order to attend Taylor in her accouchement, but her labour having come on during the period of my suspension, another medical man, some five or six miles off, was engaged to supply my place. One dark, miserable night I was sent for suddenly and entreated to go to this case, it being one of difficulty, and, after tramping ankle-deep in mud, I arrived there just in time to see the infant die; and I have not the slightest hesitation in saying that the death occurred from the want of prompt medical aid.

The second disputed item is as follows:—I was attending a family with fever, in the parish of Charlwood, nearly four miles from my house, where the father, mother, and son, lay sick in bed in one room at the same time. The boy was in a raving delirium for a fortnight, and the family was never visited by guardian, relieving officer, or clergyman, for two months, and I had to battle as I best might with poverty-worn constitutions and active disease, without the appliances of good nursing. (I can appeal to my weekly reports in this respect, if they are not destroyed.) I could not even get the house and premises lime-washed, and when the fever attacked another worn-out pauper, residing in a filthy barrack, inhabited by some half-dozen other families, I at once fumigated the dwellings of all of them, and that of the old fever cases also. I did this twice, for which I made a charge in my bill of extras of two guineas, and this they refuse to pay. It is but justice to state that after I spoke so plainly in my reports, the relieving officer did call, tap at the window, call out the nurse, make inquiries as to the doctor's attendance, and walk off.