

relieving-officer had refused a medical order, and one, as instanced in myself, is denied the payment of his legal fee on the plea of his having presumed to operate on a patient to whom "no order was given, either by the guardians, their relieving-officer, or an overseer." Last March I was sent for, late one evening, to visit Mrs. Shepherd, who I found had been suffering from strangulated femoral hernia during three days. I remained with her all night, using every endeavour to reduce the strangulation, without success. Very early in the morning, the symptoms indicating very imminent danger, I sent my carriage for Mr. M'Whinnie, of Bridge-street, Blackfriars, to assist me in the operation, which was attended with unusual difficulties, and it was performed about nine o'clock. Gangrene and erysipelas supervened, but after several weeks of severe and dangerous illness the patient perfectly recovered. I have made several applications to the board of guardians for my fee, with what degree of success the enclosed copies of letters will show. The husband of Mrs. Shepherd is an ostler, and his entire earnings probably do not exceed 14s. a week.

The fact is, the present system of medical relief is thoroughly vicious; the medical men should not be placed under the control of relieving-officers, as they now are.

If a sick person is to be attended, an "order" must be first had from the relieving-officer. If a patient is adjudged to require a bit of meat or a drop of beer, it rests with the relieving-officer to give the same or not, as he pleases, setting aside the doctor's opinion altogether. If any instrument is needed by a patient, the relieving-officer's "order" must be first obtained, although the medical officer is bound to provide all instruments at cost price. And if any operation is to be done, the relieving-officer must first grant his "order" if the surgeon have an eye to the fee or reward for the same. I assert this to be a deeply degrading position for medical men to be placed in. As medical men should be the most competent judges in all these matters, give them all the authority and all the responsibility; and if, when called upon to assign good and sufficient reasons for their conduct in any particular instance, they cannot do so, let them be reprimanded accordingly.

The guardians and the relieving-officer of Croydon miserably misinterpreted their duty when they rejected the poor woman's solicitation for a medical order, on the ground that she and her husband earned conjointly a guinea a week, as her condition inevitably cut off for a length of time all that portion of income derivable from her exertions; she might therefore, very properly, be considered to have been at that time within the pale of the poor law. Is the exercise of humanity to be expected from the medical officers, and not to be looked for in the guardians and the relieving-officers of the new poor law?

I am, Sir, your most obedient servant,

Upper Tooting, Jan. 12.

WILLIAM BAINBRIDGE.

Clapham-common, Jan. 6.

DEAR SIR,—I am directed by the guardians of the Wandsworth and Clapham Union to transmit to you a copy of a letter received by them from the poor-law board, in reference to your claim for a fee of 5*l.* for performing the operation for strangulated hernia in the case of Mrs. Shepherd.—I am, dear Sir, yours truly,

W. Bainbridge, Esq., Medical Officer,
Upper Tooting.

BENJAMIN FIELD, Clerk.

(COPY.)

Poor-Law Board, Somerset-house, Jan. 5.

SIR,—I am directed by the poor-law board to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 24th ult., in which you request their opinion with reference to the claim of Mr. Bainbridge, medical officer for the Balham and Upper Tooting district of the Wandsworth and Clapham Union, to a fee of 5*l.* for performing the operation of strangulated hernia in the case of Mrs. Shepherd.

I am to state in reply, that the board see no sufficient ground for making the payment claimed by Mr. Bainbridge in the above-mentioned case. The patient was not a pauper, and no order was given to Mr. Bainbridge to attend her, either by the guardians, their relieving-officer, or an overseer.—I am, Sir, your most obedient servant,

EBRINGTON, Secretary.

To B. Field, Esq., Clerk to the Guardians,
Wandsworth and Clapham Union, Clapham-common.

POOR-LAW SURGEONS, AND DISADVANTAGES OF POOR-LAW UNIONS.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—The large union districts which have superseded the old system of parochial surgeonships, have not proved so advantageous to the medical practitioner as some persons at first expected would be the case; and my impression is, that all parties were better off under the old system than under the new, in so

far as regards medical relief. Formerly each surgeon took charge of such parishes as were conveniently situated in respect to his private practice, so that he could attend the paupers with very little extra toil, and with no addition to his expenses but the cost of the larger quantities of medicines &c. requisite for increased numbers. Hence he could attend the poor of several parishes, perhaps, and at a small salary for each, obtain a sufficient amount to cover his augmented outlay, and enable him even to reckon something in the shape of gain at the year's end. He cannot, however, do so under the union system, for the districts are now too extensive, and rather arranged for the convenience of the relieving-officers than the surgeon; and the latter, who might be anxious to take charge of the parishes in which his private practice chiefly lies, must, if he do so, take charge also of several other parishes, perhaps quite out of his beat, and that entail upon him such an additional amount of labour and mileage as obliges him of necessity to keep an extra horse, and perhaps also an extra assistant. In this way his expenses are greatly increased, so that instead of making a small profit of pauper practice, he actually loses money by it, seeing that the salaries in the aggregate are not higher than formerly, whilst the expenses attending the practice are seriously augmented. The more extensive the district, the larger of course will be the amount of toil and time requisite for the fulfilment of the duties of the office, and consequently, the time that can be devoted to private practice will be proportionally diminished, so that if a surgeon to a country district is so fortunate as to obtain so large a stipend as eighty or ninety pounds, (which is an unusually large sum,) he will find ample employment for himself, without private practice, if he faithfully performs his duty; whilst his druggist's bill, his horse and his groom, will absorb the whole of his salary. Hence, the extended districts appear to me in every point of view undesirable, either for the established practitioner or the junior candidate for practice, and instead of being better worth the attention of surgeons, as it was said the commissioners anticipated, they have manifestly proved decidedly prejudicial to the profession, as the prevalent dissatisfaction of the generality of union surgeons sufficiently testifies. The formation of such districts has at the same time, in many instances, added greatly to the distance the poor man has to travel in order to obtain medical aid, and at the same time it has not benefited the ratepayers, seeing that the present aggregate salaries are about equal to those formerly paid by the separate parishes. How, then, are these crying evils to be remedied? I would suggest, as a beginning, that the profession should contend strongly for the establishment of union dispensaries for the supply of all medicines and appliances for the sick poor of the several unions, medical officers, &c., and for a competent dispenser to be provided at the cost of the union: then let the guardians offer to the district officers such remuneration for their professional services as may be just and equal to the services required; in such an event, however small the amount of his salary, the surgeon will be able to reckon it as something in the shape of a payment for professional services, whereas the present salary, though appearing nominally larger, in reality yields hardly anything for professional services, by reason of the large deductions for drugs &c.

January, 1848.

A QUONDAM UNION SURGEON.

INFANTILE MENSTRUATION.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—A short time since, I had a little patient, aged three years, and when I was prescribing for her, the mother hinted to me the necessity there was not to administer violent medicine, as the little child was "poorly." I found, on inquiry, that for twelve months this child had been regularly menstruating; and with the permission of the mother I stripped off the clothes, to observe the external organization of my patient.

The mammæ were as healthily developed as in an adult of twenty years; the nates were also developed, the pubes having a slight flush of hair upon them; the labiæ &c. as in a matured young person; the hymen was perfect, and the vagina anteriorly, was of large size. The countenance was antique, and, altogether, this babe of three years had the appearance and gait of a little old woman.

I observed the child for a few months; she menstruated regularly, and suffered all the concomitant uterine, lumbar, and other divers aches and pains, as is usual in those who perform this function, as evidencing a capability of utero-gestation. I gave the mother an earnest caution to guard her child; and I transmit a brief report of the case for your valuable columns, should you deem it worthy of insertion.

I am, Sir, obediently yours,

Brompton-row, Oct. 1847.

THOMAS EMBLING, M.R.C.S.L.