

DISCRETION IN PRESCRIBING.

To the Editors of THE LANCET.

SIRS,—The remarks of Dr. Nestor Tirard on hypnotics in THE LANCET of April 11th, p. 1022, excite an uneasy feeling whether the whole practice of prescribing does not need revision and reform. The general practitioner can get into a bad habit of hypnotising his patients with drugs, as this is easier and more often in demand than a carefully thought-out line of "masterly inactivity" or far-seeing régime, but he at least has it in his power to stay his hand if he makes his own medicines when the signals point to danger. The consultant, or he who does not dispense, on the other hand, once he has committed his directions to writing, which becomes the absolute property of the patient, ceases to be able to withdraw them from circulation or from repetition at the will of the patient. If we write a cheque we can "cross" it or make it "not negotiable," and almost everything that a lawyer commits to paper or parchment is safeguarded against abuse, and yet it is the medical man whose writing may spell, if abused, as it often is, either death or disaster beyond his ken. I do not know the precise legal aspect of a prescription, but why this *cacoethes scribendi* on the part of the prescriber? Why should he not make sure that his prescription shall be used only as he intends and by those only whom it is meant for? A general practitioner of my acquaintance who does not dispense secures this by sending all his prescriptions to a certain chemist with whom he has an arrangement that these should be copied out and retained, no charge being made to the patient by the chemist and no prescription ever repeated except by an order from the medical man. The plan works well for all concerned and is not very costly to the medical man and yet well worth the chemist's while. If necessary the chemist will send the medicine. But where ordinary prescribing is done, as by the consultant, why should he not initial and date his prescription and underneath add the letters s.q.n. ("sine quibus non [miscenda]")? If he wishes a certain number of doses to be taken before seeing the patient again he can order so many to be dispensed and the letters s.q.n. will warn the chemist to dispense no more until he is ordered by a fresh prescription or by re-dating or initialling the old one. An out-of-date prescription could not then be made up for anyone presenting it except, of course, at the chemist's own risk, and to do so would come to be regarded as "unprofessional" dispensing—in reality, illicit prescribing. If a consultant sees a patient sent to him by his medical attendant the prescription should be sent to the latter, not given recklessly to the patient himself. As illustrating the absurdity of present methods an old lady (now in her ninety-first year) was prescribed for some 20 years ago by an eminent man. A pill was ordered and a little whisky for her stomach's sake. The pill has been long discontinued, but the "stomachic" is still in use, and though the letter, not the spirit, has been departed from—for it now amounts to two gallons of whisky per month—steadily and regularly. The case illustrates the dictum that alcohol is "a slow poison," and any remonstrance is met by the answer that the prescriber was physician to the then Prime Minister. Verily "*verbum sapienti sateat.*"—I am, Sirs, yours faithfully,

April 21st, 1903.

CIRCUMSPICE.

A CORRECTION.

To the Editors of THE LANCET.

SIRS,—Dr. W. Mitchell of 21, Park-lane, Little Horton, Bradford, Yorks, has called my attention to the fact that the reference in my book entitled "A Third Pot-Pourri" to him as recommending vegetarianism to his patients is not warranted by facts and is calculated to injure his standing in his profession and affect his practice. I made the statement on the authority of another gentleman and did not, as I suppose I ought to have done, check the correctness of the information. I have already offered Dr. Mitchell my sincere apologies. Would you, Sirs, help me by inserting this letter to repair the error which my publishers will correct in all future copies? I am, Sirs, yours faithfully,

MARIA THERESA EARLE

Sloane-gardens, S.W., April 22nd, 1903,

MANCHESTER.

(FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT.)

Manchester Medical Charities.

HOSPITAL Saturday has been fixed for May 2nd, and the Red Cross Society, which is the workmen's branch of the Hospital Sunday and Saturday Fund, has issued an appeal to the public. Last year the expenses of the 20 medical charities aided by the Fund exceeded the income by £13,000, and the hope is expressed that this will be made good. The war is now happily over and there is nothing very special to divert public sympathy, but it will be a considerable step from £4171, last year's collection, to £13,000.

Coöperators and Convalescent Homes.

Some time ago a scheme for establishing convalescent homes by coöperators from societies in Lancashire, Yorkshire, and Cheshire was started. It was to be for the use of members of those societies in the north-western section. A home was to be established at Norbreck, near Blackpool, at a cost of £25,000. This scheme was perhaps too ambitious and it was opposed by some large societies in the section, so that it has been abandoned. A largely attended conference of coöperators met, however, on April 11th in Manchester to consider the matter. In the discussion the principle of the establishment of these homes was unanimously indorsed and ultimately a motion was carried declaring in favour of the establishment of two homes, one in Yorkshire and one in Lancashire, at a cost of from £10,000 to £12,000 each, and urging the committee to prosecute the work in the most vigorous manner possible. It may be hoped that this attempt will fare better than the first did and it is satisfactory to see that the principle of self-help is not yet lost among the better sort of the working-classes. In a paper read by one of the members it was maintained that "such homes should, in his opinion, be provided, not only because of the material benefits they conferred, but as an exemplification of the higher moral duties of coöperators in helping the poorer and weaker brethren and freeing them from the necessity of asking alms from the employer and rich classes who mainly supported existing convalescent homes." If such ideas were more widely spread there would be less hospital abuse than now prevails. But if the new scheme is to succeed it must be more warmly taken up by the societies than the abortive one was, in which the total amount of capital promised towards the £25,000 required was £2766.

The Small-pox Epidemic.

Small-pox is still prevalent in Lancashire. In Burnley 35 cases have occurred in the last seven days, and extension of the hospital accommodation is being hurriedly carried on, as it is at present quite inadequate. There have been eight cases at Heywood, chiefly among school children. Three public day schools have been closed. In Oldham no fewer than 10 cases have been reported from the workhouse since Friday last. Another case has been notified in Manchester from an entirely new district. Two more cases have occurred in Salford, bringing the total to 100. Stockport was said to be free yesterday for the first time in four months.

Midwives and Death Certificates.

The following case, as reported in one of the Manchester papers, indicates a danger to the public likely to increase rather than to diminish as the result of the recent Act affecting midwives which seems to invest them with a quasi-medical position. An inquest was held recently in Manchester by Mr. L. J. Aitken, the acting coroner, respecting the death of a baby accidentally suffocated in bed. The mother stated that six other of her children, though living for periods up to 10 hours, had been certified for burial by the midwife. Mr. Aitken, therefore, had the midwife in question before him on April 17th. The coroner's inspector told the court that when he visited the midwife's house to warn her to attend she told him that "her position entitled her to give a certificate that a child was stillborn, provided that it died within 24 hours after birth." As her view of the rights and privileges of midwives may be shared by others, perhaps it would be well for the societies which give diplomas to midwives to institute lectures, examinations, and diplomas or certificates in medical jurisprudence so that the *protégées* may be guarded against very serious errors. However, when before the