

Correspondence.

"Audi alteram partem."

"HOSPITAL ABUSE."

To the Editors of THE LANCET.

SIRS,—The article by your Special Commissioner on "Hospital Abuse in Birmingham," published in your issue of July 31st, only came under my notice a day or two ago, or I should have replied earlier to his grave reflections upon our citizens generally, and the local members of the medical profession in particular. Without impugning your Commissioner's good faith for a single moment, I do not hesitate to say that the charges he makes against us are unjust in the last degree, more especially as they are entirely unsupported by evidence of any kind. It is really monstrous that a casual visitor to our city should take upon himself to assert that the vast majority of our population are not born and bred here (how can he possibly know?), and are only attracted here by sordid motives, with the intention of hurrying away again as soon as they have "made their pile," and that then, having committed himself to that view, he should proceed to convict the medical men of a similar taint and to attribute the failure of hospital reform largely to this fact.

The efforts of THE LANCET in the cause of hospital reform deserve and command the same sympathy here as elsewhere, though we have special difficulties to contend with; but the value and authority of such efforts can only be impaired by the importation into your inquiry of reckless personal imputations which are entirely unsubstantiated. If you desire the coöperation of the medical profession in this city in your laudable endeavour—as I feel sure you do—I venture to think that you will do well to repudiate and withdraw without delay the statements of which Dr. Saundby and I complain.—I am, Sirs, yours faithfully,

Aug. 10th, 1897. ALFRED H. CARTER, M.D., F.R.C.P.

To the Editors of THE LANCET.

SIRS,—You do me too much honour by devoting an entire leading article to my poor self, but as you complain of my omission to "exhibit the cowardice, cruelty, and misrepresentation of which I complain," and as you also accuse me of neglecting the courtesies of debate, I must ask from your justice a sufficient space for reply.

If your readers will only turn to the article in question¹ they will have no difficulty in seeing the nature of the charges against the citizens of Birmingham, and the medical profession in Birmingham, which you would have been more honoured in disavowing than in defending. This article asserts that the citizens of Birmingham are mostly strangers who "rush in from the outside in the eager hunt for money. They simply strive to make their pile and haste away again. Among such a population it is difficult to spread altruistic ideas; it is a wild endeavour all round after business each for himself, and but few pause to consider what are their duties to society." It is true that many citizens of Birmingham are not natives of the place, but it is not only not true, it is ridiculous, to say that these adopted citizens are not active participators in our public life. Birmingham has justly acquired a world-wide reputation for its municipal institutions and for the public spirit of its citizens, and among those who have done most for the city have been these "people from the outside." I need name only Mr. Chamberlain, Sir Josiah Mason, Sir John Jaffray, and Mr. Jesse Collings as instances to the point. A city which has shown so much public spirit that it has been often quoted as a model of municipal progress, which has even earned the perhaps too laudatory title of the best-governed city in the world, but which certainly has within the short space of a generation transformed itself, re-modeled and re-built its institutions so as to be a pattern and example to other places, can afford to disregard the ill-informed opinions you have so rashly published. I leave it to impartial judges to say whether such charges inflict more damage on Birmingham or on its critic.

But your article proceeds to say that "this spirit"—i.e., of selfish money-grabbing—"also animates more or less—let us hope very much less—the medical profession, and therefore it has been *particularly difficult* to group the medical men together and get them to put their *personal interest* in the background so as to defend the position of the profession as a whole." The italics are mine; but surely this accusation is so serious that if it be untrue it is not undeserving of the title "monstrous" or of being styled a "cowardly cruel libel," and I say that it is not true, but the very opposite of the truth.

There is more to follow. We are told that "in Birmingham it suffices for one set of men to attempt to form an organisation or to start a movement, and at once another set of men are stirred with suspicions, or even moved to open hostility. Instead of inquiring what good cause is to be promoted, they will strive to find out that some personal interest is to be served." I seek in vain either in your article or in my recollection of the medical history of this city for the last twenty years any justification for these charges. To warrant them there surely should have been at least some one serious occasion upon which we showed ourselves unable to coöperate for the common good. "In smaller towns," we are told, "where the spirit of commercialism is not so rampant, organisation has been more easily accomplished." May one not suspect that the size of the town has more than the spirit of commercialism to do with this simplicity of organisation? But where is the town in which this boasted organisation has achieved any notable success? I know only of those in which it has made the state of the profession worse than before. Are we to be blamed because we do not move until we see a prospect of doing so with advantage?

The charge of want of organisation is as ridiculous as is the explanation given of the failure of the report of the Hospital Reform Committee. These only go to show how ill-informed you have been, and upon what an untrustworthy basis your charges have been laid. I cannot trespass farther on your space, but if you will withdraw the charges of which I complain I shall have much pleasure in telling your readers why the report of the Hospital Reform Committee failed.

With respect to your accusation of want of courtesy, I have only to add that if in rebutting accusations which are false and injurious I have been wanting in the courtesy due to those who make such accusations I apologise, but I leave it to the judgment of the profession to say whether such charges should ever have been published and defended in the editorial columns of THE LANCET.

I am, Sirs, yours faithfully,

Birmingham, Aug. 9th, 1897.

ROBERT SAUNDBY.

To the Editors of THE LANCET.

SIRS,—I read and re-read your correspondent's article on Hospital Abuse in Birmingham, and I failed to find anything that deserved the epithets used by Dr. Saundby in his letter. For some reason or other Dr. Saundby has not thought fit to lend any countenance to the discussion of a question which has been agitating men's minds for the past thirty years—a question, I may add, that statesmen of the highest eminence and medical men of the highest standing have expressed their sympathy with. Your correspondent does not need any testimonials from any member of the profession, but all those who have carefully perused his articles will bear me out when I say that he has succeeded in presenting your readers with a statesman-like view of the whole question. He has pointed out from time to time that hospitals are abused, not only by the public, but by general practitioners.

It has been a source of gratification to my association to find that at all of their local meetings the many members of the hospital staffs have been in sympathy with our objects and have expressed their determination to bring about a reform of the present unsatisfactory condition of affairs. It is only by a free and frank discussion of this pressing problem that we can hope to arrive at a satisfactory solution; and the continuation of your correspondent's letters will undoubtedly help very materially in this direction.

I am, Sirs, your obedient servant,

T. GARRETT HORDER,

Cardiff, Aug. 9th, 1897.

Hon. Sec., Hospital Reform Association.

¹ THE LANCET, July 31st, 1897, p. 234.