

THE STATE AND THE DOCTOR

THE STATE AND THE
DOCTOR. BY SIDNEY
AND BEATRICE WEBB

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PREFACE

WE do a great deal of State Doctoring in England—more than is commonly realised—and our arrangements have got into a tangle, which urgently needs straightening out. Everywhere there is a duplication of authorities and more or less overlapping of work. We are spending out of the rates and taxes, in one way or another, directly on sickness and Public Health, a vast sum of money annually—no man knows how much, but it certainly amounts to six or seven millions sterling. The greater part of this sum goes for the maintenance and treatment of the patients after we have let them become sick; some more is absorbed in what is but a skimpy remuneration for the large number of doctors employed in the State Medical Service; whilst relatively little is devoted to the most economical method of dealing with the problem, namely, prevention. For the most part, just as in early Victorian times, instead of preventing the occurrence of disease, we choose to let it happen, and then find ourselves driven to try expensively to cure it. Even when it has happened, we do our best (except with regard to three or four selected kinds) to avoid treating the case at the

beginning of the trouble. In the Poor Law branch of our State Medical Service, we spend, it is said, something like two millions a year as the direct result of one disease alone (tuberculosis). It seems that we know now that most of the consumptive patients who die in our workhouses could have been cured if they had been taken thoroughly in hand in time, instead of too late. Nevertheless we deliberately go on trying, by the very rules by which we fetter the State Medical organisation that deals with these patients, to prevent them from coming to us until they are so far gone in the disease as to have become technically "destitute." Incidentally also, until they have become actually incurable! Meanwhile, as is now being revealed to us, a vast amount of sickness goes altogether untreated, with the result of grave damage to our population, and unnecessary loss of productive capacity to the community as a whole.

Now, we put up with this waste, and we allow our statesmen to postpone the task of straightening out the tangle, very largely because we are not aware of the facts. There is no popular description of our existing State Doctoring. Many worthy people, thinking themselves educated, don't even know of its existence. There is not even an official report setting forth exactly what is being done and left undone for sickness and the Public Health in the different towns and rural districts. There are no medical statistics as to our success or failure with regard to this disease

or to that—we don't even know how many patients are under treatment by the State Doctors, let alone how many are restored to health. There is no systematic inspection of this not inconsiderable part of the nation's collective activities. It is actually impossible to ascertain how many municipal hospitals there are in existence in the United Kingdom, or how many patients they treat annually, or which particular diseases. What is only too painfully obvious is that, whilst much of our money is being wasted, the gaps are large.

In the absence of any more exhaustive survey of our State Doctoring, made by some more highly qualified observer, we think that our imperfect sketch may be of use, if only as demonstrating the need for something better. The sketch was made, in the first place, at the instance of the Royal Commission on the Poor Law, to whom it was submitted as a Memorandum in 1907. We have enlarged and extended it, as far as possible bringing it up to date; and we have added some explanation of the conclusions to which we have been led, and of the proposals that seem to us best calculated to stop the waste and to straighten out the tangle.

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance afforded to us in this inquiry by many hundreds of medical practitioners in all branches of the profession. We have, wherever practicable, given references to their evidence before the Poor Law Commission. But to large numbers of them, whether private practitioners

or "State Doctors," in the Poor Law Medical Service or in the Public Health Department, from the youngest recruit to those of highest official rank, we owe much more than their formal evidence; and for what they have so courteously done for us, we must content ourselves with these general thanks. We must, however, specially acknowledge the expert help afforded in the earlier part of the inquiry by Miss Louisa Woodcock (Somerville College, Oxford), M.A. (Trinity College, Dublin), M.D., B.S. (London), Physician to Out-patients' Department (late Pathologist), New Hospital for Women, and Physician to the Canning Town Medical Mission. In another way, the book owes much to the labours of Miss M. E. Bulkley, B.Sc. (Econ.), of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

We cannot refrain from adding, at the risk of seeming impertinence, that, from one end of the Kingdom to the other, we have been impressed with the vast amount of laborious, unrecognised, and very ill-paid service that, out of the dictates of humanity which form so honourable a tradition of the medical profession, is being rendered to the poor by the D.M.O. and the M.O.H., as well as by the private practitioner himself, who is often in many ways as much of a public servant as his brethren bearing official titles. Such ungrudging and devoted service to the community merits a less invidious method of remuneration and a more adequate reward. But it deserves more than this. We owe it to the doctors

not to hamper their beneficent work by clumsy administrative organisation. We can, at any rate, stand out of their way; and this at present we are not doing. We owe it to them, at least to let them intervene in time, and not, by refusing to deal with cases at the incipient stage, to foredoom so much of their work to futility. They may even fairly ask us, as a "business" people, not, by the neglect of obvious preventive and hygienic measures, and by the failure to enforce even a minimum standard in the conditions of civilized existence, to condemn a whole profession to something very like the labours of Sisyphus.

SIDNEY AND BEATRICE WEBB.

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