

Peter Reilly O'Connell (1860–1927)

President of the Ulster Medical Society

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Presidential Opening Address

Ulster Medical Society

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Ladies and Gentlemen, Ever since the passing of the Medical Charities' Act the Dispensary Medical Officers have been agitating for reforms in the conditions under which they serve.

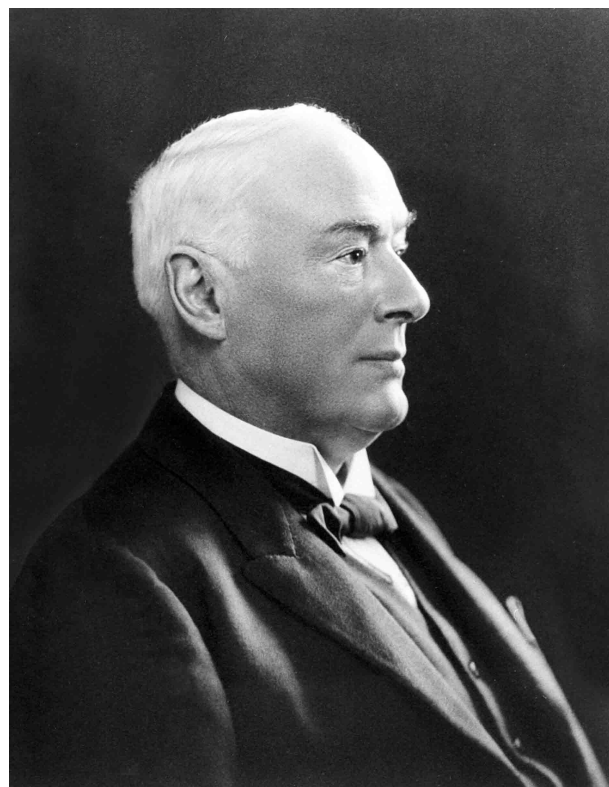
The Irish Medical Association has worked for many years towards that end, but with little success: fees in cases where the services of outside professional men were requisitioned have been prescribed, and there is now a general recognition of the right of a Dispensary Officer to have his annual holiday without encroachment on his income. Beyond these small concessions nothing has been done to get rid of the grievances of the Irish Poor-Law Medical Officers.

The Viceregal Commission recommended a State Medical Service to be entered by competitive examination in the same way as the Army Medical Corps and the Navy Medical Staff are recruited, promotion being by merit, with a fixed progressive scale of salaries, and with a definite prospect of retiring allowances on a fixed scale.

The obvious advantages of such an arrangement would lead to the retention in this country of some of our best men, the encouragement of men beginning in small places to aspire to larger areas of practice, and the security that all would have as against the risk of disablement and old

ages. Votes have been taken by the Irish Medical Association, first of their members generally, and later of the Poor-Law men as to the changes suggested by the Viceregal Commission. Many sent no reply at all, but in both cases the preponderance of opinion was in favour of the proposed changes.

The Irish Committee of the British Medical Association took up the subject of reform in the Irish Poor-Law Medical Service, and those concerned have regarded their efforts with greater hopes. A Joint Committee of the two Associations was formed to watch the interests of the Medical Profession in the changes in the Poor-Law, which are recognised as imminent. This Joint Committee had interviews with



the L.G.B. and other officials of the Government, and were assured that if the medical practitioners of Ireland would support the heading in the circular sent out, the draft of the New Bill on the subject would, as far as the Medical Officers were concerned, be framed on the suggested lines.

The Joint Committee have tested the views of the Poor-Law men and of the Irish Medical Association on the main points. The reply of the Medical Association was, that what they wanted to know was the mind of the whole profession, not only of the Poor-Law men who are most interested.

The Poor-Law men are practically unanimous, and are now appealing to the outside profession for aid in securing what would be an immense improvement in their conditions of service, and would give them some relief from the humiliating conditions in which they now live, dependent, as regards emoluments and superannuation upon Boards of Guardians and Rural District Councils.

It is not alone as Dispensary Medical Officers, but as Medical Officers of Health, that the position of a medical man is anomalous and filled with

complication and difficulty. Admittedly, his salary as a Dispensary Medical Officer is fixed at a figure which makes it more or less a "retaining fee," and he must secure as a supplement a paying practice more or less according to the local conditions. In such cases it is for him an invidious position to discharge effectively his duties as a Public Health Officer, ordering and directing prosecutions against offenders against the Public Health Acts, when, as a matter of fact, some of the greatest of these offenders may be some of his own patients – some of the few in a country district who do not requisition his services on the force of a red ticket.

The recommendation of the Viceregal Commission was that this new national service should be under the control of a Board of Medical representatives – one from each University in Ireland, one each from the Colleges of Surgeons and Physicians, and the Medical Commissioner of the L.G.B., with perhaps some representatives of County Councils.

The great preponderance of opinion, so far as it has been tested, is in favour of reform, and it behoves those who hold leading positions in the profession to do their utmost to remedy the existing grievances, either by advocating the findings of the Viceregal Commission or the recommendations of the Royal Commission who dealt with the Poor-Law and Medical service in its Imperial aspect.