

DOCUMENT 17–III (Online Companion)

Early Days: General Board of Health doings

A. Circular from the newly reconstituted board¹

On entering upon the duties of this office, the **President of the Board** at once addressed a letter to the metropolitan boards of guardians with respect to the arrangements for preventing, when possible, or mitigating the visitation of epidemic cholera, now so widely prevalent through London, offering the cooperation of the board in carrying out the directions issued by the **late board**. Answers, more or less satisfactory, have been sent by most of the boards of guardians, some accepting the board's offer of advice and assistance; others declining it, and stating the arrangements they have made for the execution of their duties under the directions referred to; others stating generally that they have made the necessary arrangements without describing what these are; while from some no answer has yet been received.

Notice having thus been given to the metropolitan guardians of the board's readiness to aid them, if they required it, the board has now to discharge the not less important duty of ascertaining how far arrangements have been made by the guardians in execution of the board's directions for preventing the spread of the disease, or for placing medical aid and information within the reach of all. To ascertain this it will be necessary to bring under skilled and impartial observation the districts of the metropolis where the epidemic prevails. For this purpose six additional medical inspectors have been appointed who will at once enter upon their functions; and, where boards of guardians are found to have neglected their duty in relation to the epidemic, the General Board of Health will do its utmost to enforce that duty in so far as it is empowered by law.

With a view to give additional weight to the recommendations and directions of the General Board of Health in cases where medical questions must be dealt with, the board has been empowered to appoint a **medical council**, including some of the most distinguished members of all branches of the medical profession, of whose advice and suggestions the board may avail itself when necessary. A scientific investigation has also been directed by the board into the conditions attendant on the epidemic in the metropolis, to embrace both microscopical, meteorological, chemical, and medical branches of inquiry, and the arrangements for the several classes of observations have been already made or are in progress.

In the parish of St. James, Westminster, where an alarming outbreak of the epidemic has just taken place, the board has at once directed a **house-to-house visitation**, and it is most desirable that boards of guardians

President of the Board: Benjamin Hall, MP, a fierce critic of Edwin Chadwick's influence on the original GBoH, assumed duties on 12 August 1854.

late board: Parliament abolished the original GBoH when its five-year term expired 31 July 1854. It was the only way to end Edwin Chadwick's dominance. A GBoH was still needed due to the current cholera epidemic. Parliament appointed a new GBoH for one year, with one of its own as President and sole member.

medical council: A group of sanitary-minded physicians, surgeons, apothecaries, and scientists to advise the GBoH and to staff three investigative committees—Scientific Inquiries (CSI), Treatments, and Foreign Correspondence.

house-to-house visitation: For the instructions given to the three inspectors appointed to make inquiries in the St. James cholera field, see Document 23 <CWS>.

¹ "General Board of Health," *Times* (4 September 1854), 7, a.

throughout the metropolis should have ready all the machinery for setting such visitations on foot at a moment's notice, in accordance with the directions contained in the general board's instructional minute which has been sent to them all. The following simple suggestions as to precautions to be observed by all at this time have been circulated:—

“Precautions against Cholera

1. Apply to a medical man immediately in case of looseness of the bowels, as it may bring on cholera.
2. Do not take any salts or other strong medicine without proper advice.
3. Beware of drink, for excess in beer, wine, or spirits is likely to be followed by cholera.
4. Avoid eating meat that is tainted or unwholesome, decayed or unripe fruit, and stale fish or vegetables.
5. Avoid fasting too long. Be moderate at meals.
6. Avoid great fatigue, or getting heated and then chilled.
7. Avoid getting wet, or remaining in wet clothes.
8. Keep yourself clean, and your body and feet as dry and as warm as your means and occupation will permit.
9. Keep your rooms well cleaned and limewashed; open the windows as often as possible; remove all dirt and impurities immediately.
10. Use chloride of lime or zinc to remove any offensive smells.
11. If there are any dust or dirt heaps, foul drains, bad smells, or other nuisances in the house or neighbourhood, make complaint without delay to the local authorities having legal power to remove them; or, if there be no such authorities, or you do not know who they are, complain to the board of guardians.”

B. New medical inspectors appointed²

The following gentlemen have been appointed for medical inspection in the districts affected by the epidemic in the metropolis:

Dr. [Arthur Hill] Hassall [general practitioner, Epidemiological Society, Author of a microscopical study of London water supply].

Dr. [Richard] King [general practitioner].

Mr. Patterson [surgeon].

Dr. Glover [uncertain].

² “General Board of Health,” *Observer* (3 September 1854), 5, b. The total number of medical inspectors for the metropolis soon swelled to nine with the addition of Drs. Edward Headlam Greenhow, David Macloughlin, and Donald Fraser; John Sutherland, *Report on Epidemic Cholera in London*, 25.

Mr. Walsh [surgeon].

Dr. [John Stewart] Allen [surgeon to the St. Marylebone Infirmary].

C. Instructions to the new medical inspectors³

The six inspectors who have been charged to report to the Board of Health on arrangements made by the metropolitan boards of guardians have been directed to extend their inquiries to the following subjects:—

1. The extent of medical relief now existing: Number of medical officers; number of day and night dispensaries; number of house to house visitors; measures for arresting diarrhoea in workhouses; copies of notices issued by guardians; hospital accommodation and houses of refuge.

2. Extent of the disease: Number of cholera cases; number of diarrhoea cases; deaths from either under Union medical officers. This information to be obtained for a few days back, and tabulated on one of the returns, under the heads of district medical officers' cases, dispensary cases, medical visitors' cases).

3. Localities affected: A list of those where cholera or diarrhoea chiefly prevails, and has hitherto or recently prevailed; visit some of the worst localities, inspect them and the houses, converse with the people, ascertain to what extent diarrhoea prevails, and what cleansing measures, lime-whiting, &c., may be required, and whether there be any inspector of nuisances to carry out these measures; examine the water supply, and ascertain whether it is taken from the river above or below Chelsea-reach; inquire as to nuisances or noxious trades, and inspect them.

4. And after inquiry to report to the General Board of Health:—on the particulars mentioned above; on the number of additional dispensaries required; on the additional medical officers required; on the additional medical visitors required, stating their number; additional inspectors of nuisances or cleansing staff required; additional hospital accommodation or houses of refuge required.

D. Appointment of a Medical Council and minutes from its first meeting⁴

The following is the list of the [thirteen] members of the Medical Council appointed by the President of the General Board of Health:—

1. John Ayrton Paris, MD, **FRS**, President of the Royal College of

³ “General Board of Health,” *Times* (5 September 1854): 7, a.

⁴ “General Board of Health,” *Times* (7 September 1854): 5, e-f. Benjamin Hall, GBoH President, nominated Clark, Alderson, Baly, Simon, Owen, and Farr. The College of Physicians nominated Paris, Babington, and Tweedie. The College of Surgeons nominated Brodie and Lawrence. The Society of Apothecaries nominated Ward and Bacot.

FRS: Fellow of the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge, founded in 1660.

Bart: Baronet.

Physicians.

2. Sir James Collins Brodie, **Bart.**, FRS, Sergeant Surgeon to the Queen, Consulting Surgeon to St. George's Hospital. [Decided not to serve on the council; replaced by Neil Arnott, MD, LRCP, Physician to the Queen.]

3. Sir James Clark, Bart., MD, FRS, Physician in Ordinary to the Queen and to His Royal Highness Prince Albert.

4. James Alderson, MD, FRS, Fellow and Treasurer of the Royal College of Physicians, Physician to St. Mary's Hospital.

5. Benjamin Guy Babington, MD, FRS, Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, late Physician to Guy's Hospital.

6. Alexander Tweedie, MD, FRS, Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, Physician to the Fever Hospital, Examiner in Medicine in the University of London.

7. William Baly, MD, FRS, Assistant Physician to St. Bartholomew's Hospital, Physician to the Milbank Penitentiary.

8. William Lawrence, FRS, Vice-President of the Royal College of Surgeons, Surgeon to St. Bartholomew's Hospital, Surgeon Extraordinary to the Queen.

9. John Simon, FRS, Surgeon to St. Thomas's Hospital, Officer of Health in the City of London.

10. Richard Owen, FRS, Professor of Zoology in the Royal College of Surgeons.

11. Nathaniel Ward, Master of the Society of Apothecaries.

12. John Bacot, Inspector of Anatomy, Member of the Senate of the University of London.

13. William Farr, MD, Registrar-General's Office.

These gentlemen, with the exception of Sir B. Brodie (who being out of town had not sent in his answer) and Mr. Green (who has stated his inability to attend, in consequence of his other avocations), met yesterday at the office of the General Board of Health, when the following letter was read by the President:—

6 September [1854]

Gentlemen,—In opening the first sitting of the first medical council that has allowed itself to be associated with this department it becomes my duty, after thanking you for the public spirit and benevolence you have shown in undertaking this service to the community, to point out briefly both what appear to me to be the general objects in respect of which your assistance and advice will be useful, and the more special and immediate matters to which your attention is invited at present.

I am charged with the responsible duty of directing the sanitary

administration of the country, so far as we have as yet anything deserving the name. But upon scientific matters connected therewith, where the medical profession are to be consulted, advised with, laid under contribution for service or information, or called upon to act, I wish to have the aid of a medical council to whom I may submit questions for consideration and whom I may ask to suggest or undertake inquiries as may from time to time be necessary. The special work of this department is the application of the Public Health Act to such towns as petition for it. Besides this, in times of epidemic, the board is charged with the duty of issuing regulations and directions for the prevention as far as possible or mitigation of disease.

It will be apparent that it is in connection with the latter branch of my duties I shall have occasion for your valuable service. But should public confidence be acquired to this department—should the science of public health take its place among the matters with which statesmanship may properly concern itself, as I believe it must, sooner or later, be the case—a wider field will be opened to this department and to the professional advisers whom it may be able to associate with it. The circumstances of this country, its wealth and poverty, its great cities with their social extremes of luxury and privation, its multifarious industrial occupations—all point to the duty of studying the effects on life and health of trades, callings, and **processes**, habitations, sites, water supply, sewerage, the adulteration of substances used for food, drink, and medicine as matters vitally affecting the well-being of the nation.

processes: Ongoing activities.

On many of these subjects I hope it may be in my power at future periods to avail myself of scientific aid, but at present the matter which most presses is the epidemic now unhappily prevalent in this metropolis, as well as in other parts of the united kingdom. With this my duty brings me into active and hourly contact, and I should deeply regret if (besides the work this office may be enabled to do at present in aid of local authorities, or, when necessary, in compelling the observance of the law), I am not able to deduce, by your assistance, from this terrible visitation both facts and lessons which may hereafter be made available.

For this end I have the cordial cooperation of the Poor Law Board, the Registrar-General, and the Commissioners of Sewers for the metropolis, while all through the country the registration staff and the local boards of health may render me the most useful service. But the most valuable result within my reach at present will be wanting unless I have your aid in procuring such information as to the concomitants and course of the epidemic as only medical and scientific observation can detect.

Cholera is now very widely prevalent in London; up to the 2nd of September 4,070 persons have died of the disease in the metropolis alone. I propose to direct inquiries into the conditions which attend the presence

of the epidemic, so far as they can be gathered from meteorological, microscopical, and chemical observation. The gentlemen who have undertaken to conduct these inquiries are here, and will detail for your approbation what is proposed or has been done. But, besides this, I have caused a form to be drawn up which I propose, with your approval, .and after it has been settled by you, to have circulated among all the qualified medical practitioners in London with a view to determine the number of cases of choleraic disease, the proportion of deaths and recoveries, and the treatment pursued in each case. The settlement of this return is the immediate object of this meeting of the council.

I wish, also, that Dr. Sutherland should state to you what has been done in the way of providing for superintendence of the execution by local authorities of the directions and regulations of the [previous] board, and I shall be much obliged if you would aid me by any suggestion as to other means fro this purpose that you may think desirable to be taken. I have also directed to be laid before you copies of the handbills issued by the [previous] board, giving plain advice adapted to the emergency. Any suggestions as to these I shall be thankful for, as, indeed, for everything that may briefly and clearly inform the public mind, and, while promoting calmness and confidence in the means of prevention, indicate these means, in the way best adapted to popular apprehension.

I have the honour to be, gentlemen,

Your most obedient servant,

B. Hall.

The council considered the proposed form of return referred to in that letter, and agreed to [a] circular to be sent with the form to all qualified medical practitioners in the metropolis ... [in order to develop a] systematic record of cases of choleraic disease, their treatment and results, with a view to determine, in so far as may be possible, the best mode of meeting this formidable epidemic.... The cases of recovery, as well as of death, should be systematically observed and recorded

Intelligence having been received of a violent outbreak of cholera at

Wisbech, Dr. Milroy was ordered to proceed instantly to that town.

Wisbech: Town about
100 miles north of
London.