

Medical advertising: *The Family Encyclopaedia of Medicine* scandal of 1914

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ABSTRACT The past 100 years have seen a transition from a total ban in Britain on all advertising by doctors to the laity to almost total freedom of medical information, with probable benefit to public health but also a risk of loss of privacy. *The Family Encyclopaedia of Medicine*, written by Dr Hugh Howard Riddle and published by Lord Northcliffe's *Daily Mail* in 1914, started a flood of medical journalism in the press and the newer media. The lavishly advertised misattribution of its authorship to 'thirty eminent specialists', including Clifford Allbutt and William Osler, caused a major rumpus in the London Royal College of Physicians, but the fortnightly publication continued and became a four-volume book, popular with a public avid for more and more medical information.

KEYWORDS Sir Dyce Duckworth, medical advertising, medical journalism for the laity, Lord Northcliffe, Sir William Osler, Hugh Howard Riddle

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Medical advertising at the beginning of the twentieth century had to be discreet and within the profession – this was probably a by-product of the separation of the medical profession from the 'trade' of the apothecaries in the nineteenth century. It could be by word of mouth, through the teaching of students, in articles in the medical press and in strictly medical books. In an era when doctors' income was from competitive private practice, any communication with the general public on medical matters had to be anonymous. Lloyd George's National Insurance Act of 1912 and, even more, Bevan's National Health Service Act of 1949 provided practitioners with regular incomes and thereby abolished this dependency. At the same time, the growing power of the press and the advent of radio and television fostered demand by the media, and then by the public, for communications to be attributable to individuals.

In 1973 Charles Fletcher¹ credited Charles (later Lord) Hill with pioneering this loss of anonymity by having himself named when he was the BBC's 'Radio Doctor' in the 1940s. This was at a time when Sir Charles Wilson (later Lord Moran) still gave his views anonymously, even on non-medical matters, on the BBC radio programme *The Brains Trust*.² By the 1970s, the naming of practising doctors had become the rule.

THE FAMILY ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF MEDICINE

On 26 February 1914 the Harmsworth (Amalgamated) Press began to publish a new fortnightly publication, *The Family Encyclopaedia of Medicine*,³ for 7d per copy (Figure 1). Its subtitle read: 'edited by HH Riddle MD Camb, with assistance from 30 eminent Medical and Surgical Specialists'. These specialists were listed on the first two

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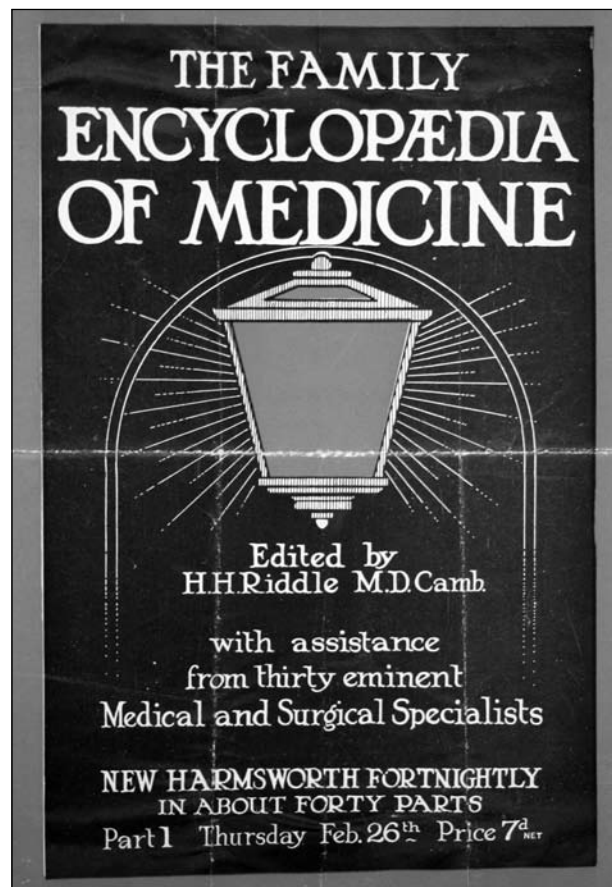


FIGURE 1 The February 1914 advertisement for *The Family Encyclopaedia of Medicine*. (Reproduced with permission of the Royal College of Physicians of London)

pages with their qualifications and appointments (see Figure 2) – the first three being Sir Lauder Brunton, Sir William Osler (Figure 3) and Sir Clifford Allbutt. Another 40 issues,

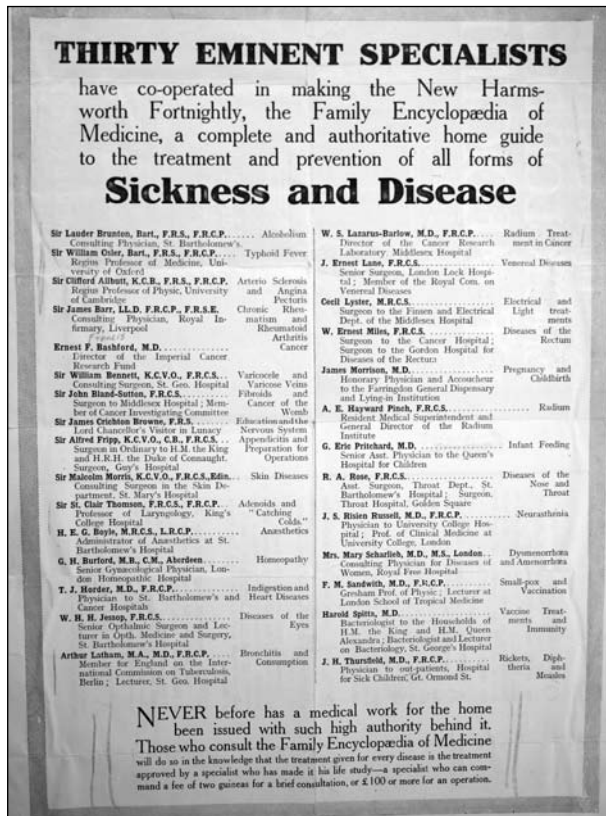


FIGURE 2 The list of ‘eminent specialists’ who, it was claimed, had contributed to *The Family Encyclopaedia of Medicine*. (Reproduced with permission of the Royal College of Physicians of London)

featuring ailments from A to Z, were scheduled. Riddle had not really edited the articles but had written them himself, having corresponded with his ‘contributors’ about specific matters but without declaring his full purpose.

A week before the first issue, the press and publishing magnate Lord Northcliffe⁴ advertised his new publication in his own *Daily Mail* (but not in his more upmarket *The Times*) and in the *Daily Telegraph*, and by posters and billboards, which named the supposed contributors across London.

Gossip must have been instantaneous, for on 20 February 1914 Sir Dyce Duckworth, in his 30th year as the Royal College of Physicians of London (RCPL) Treasurer, wrote about the adverts to the College Registrar, for submission to the President and Censors:

I regard the enclosed as a very regrettable advertisement. How the Regius Professors and others of our Fellows can be tempted by such claptrap by the influence of the *Daily Mail* passes my understanding ... I think the Censors Board should see this. I am much shocked and grieved by it ... What is our College coming to?⁵

Several of the ‘contributors’ wrote to Riddle and to the Amalgamated Press demanding withdrawal, but the first issue went ahead on 26 February 1914. On 4 March

JA Ormerod, the RCPL Registrar from 1909, wrote to all the College Fellows, Members and Licentiate named by Riddle, stating:

The President and Censors deeply regret to observe that your name appears in the advertisement, a copy of which I enclose, and in a similar advertisement in *The Daily Telegraph* of the 29th ult (encl). They desire also to draw your attention to an article in the *Daily Mail* of the same date (enclosed).

They hope to receive an assurance from you that your name has been inserted without your knowledge or consent. They further desire to draw your attention to a Resolution of the College dated Feb 2 1888. I enclose a copy.

They hope that you will communicate at once with the Editor and Publishers of the *Family Encyclopaedia of Medicine* requiring that your name be withdrawn from the advertisements, and from succeeding numbers of the publication, if you have not already done so.⁶

The 1888 Resolution of the College read:

That it is undesirable that any Fellow, Member or Licentiate of the College should contribute articles on professional subjects to journals professing to supply medical knowledge to the general public, or should in any way advertise himself or permit himself to be advertised in such journals.⁷

The rebuttal of this accusation came from them all, many with enclosed copies of correspondence with Riddle, stating the obvious, namely their ignorance of it all. The dropping of their names from the fortnightly publication may or may not have happened after the third issue, but the original title, description and all the names reappeared in the eventual book edition of the *Family Encyclopaedia* published in four volumes later in 1914 and 1915.³

The supposed contributors felt hurt by Dr Riddle’s unauthorised naming, but even more by the College’s clumsy intervention, to judge by the letters in its archives.

CONTRETEMPS IN THE COLLEGE

The Censors’ Board met on 12 March 1914, and in its minutes wrote complacently:

The President and Censors have considered the replies from the Fellows ... concerning the use of their names in connection with the *Family Encyclopaedia of Medicine* and are glad to find that those concerned recognise the necessity for action which the Censors’ Board has taken [and] accept their assurance that the improper use of their names was without their knowledge and consent...⁶

The Board also received Osler's second letter demanding action by the College (his first had been to Ormerod, the Registrar), and two from Allbutt objecting to the tone of the Registrar's communication, but no action was taken on either, beyond acknowledgement.

The reactions of the accused were identical in their disclaimers and in their disgust at Riddle's disingenuousness. Riddle blamed it all on the publishers, while he was away at a hotel in Kent, suffering from 'a sort of nervous breakdown'.⁸ He had brief disclaiming letters published in *The Lancet* and the *British Medical Journal*, but continued *The Family Encyclopaedia of Medicine* unchanged.

Sir Bertrand (later Lord) Dawson, a future RCPL president, in his 'softly, softly' response to the Censors did not vent his feelings but organised a meeting of the 'contributors', which may have led to less blatant advertising. Sir Thomas (later Lord) Horder also responded purely factually on 12 March; in a further hand-written letter of the same date, he even apologised to the Registrar for having put him to the trouble of a second 'unofficial' letter, which is not in the archives.

In contrast, the responses of the 'brothers regii' (Osler's term for Allbutt and himself) showed open disgust. Sir Clifford Allbutt first wrote on 6 March from Cambridge to the Registrar:

Your letter is a little belated, and perhaps I need not trouble you with much reply. The Med Council [of which Allbutt was a member] drew my attention to the advert a week ago. I wrote to Riddle who promised to stop the whole business. He was (he says) no party to it, being away ill. I have not the faintest recollection of ever having heard of this Encyclopaedia before, still less of promising to contribute ... Of course I don't intend to contribute in any way.⁹

A second letter on 15 March was even more outspoken:

I am sorry that your letter of the 14th contains no sort of apology for the former letter from the Censors ... That letter has caused much resentment in the minds (I believe of all) who received it; many of those concerned have expressed themselves to me indignantly concerning its admonitory tone. And I cannot add that this second letter is not wholly devoid of the same homiletic tone. The Censors' letters are strongly contrasted with that from the Gen. Med. Council ... [which] supposed us to be unaware of its issue, and that we should be anxious to take the earliest opportunity of repudiating it. We hope the Censors will in future be a little less censorious...¹⁰

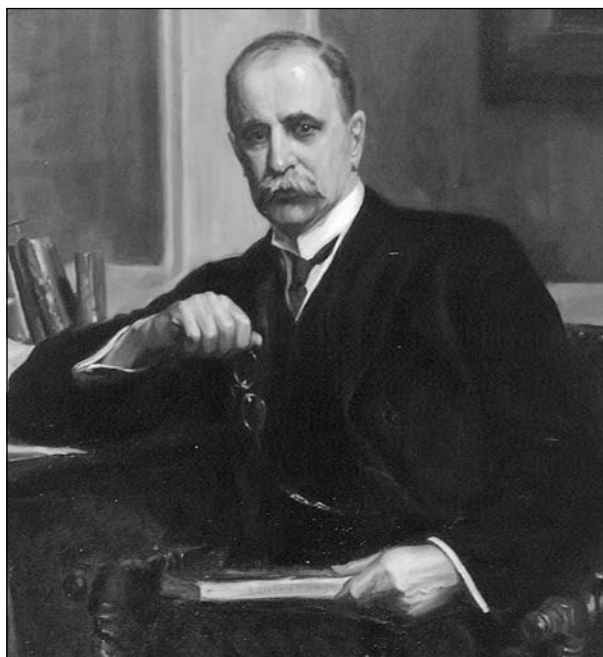


FIGURE 3 Sir William Osler. Portrait by Joyce Aris. (Image by kind permission of the Royal College of Physicians of London. Unsuccessful efforts were made to contact the estate of the artist)

SIR WILLIAM OSLER

The most readable response to the Registrar was Osler's first letter of 5 March:

Your letter, with its lurid enclosure, is the first intimation I have of the existence of *The Family Encyclopaedia of Medicine*, in connection with which the use of my name was entirely unauthorised. Six months ago a Dr Riddle asked me to look over a paper on typhoid fever, to which I replied that I was too busy. When three months later a type-written article appeared I looked him up, and finding that he was a Cambridge man of apparently good standing, I glanced it over and made a suggestion about typhoid carriers. I made no written corrections. There was nothing on his letter-paper to indicate that he was connected in any way with a popular publication, of which your enclosure to-day is the first and only intimation I have had. I have written to Dr Riddle that I consider the use of my name unwarranted, and obtained by use of subterfuge, and that he has grossly abused what was meant to be a kindly act to a young colleague.¹¹

Three days later, on 8 March, Osler wrote once more:

As in morals an obligation to control carries with it an obligation to defend, I hereby ask the College to take steps – 1st, to have my name removed from the objectionable advertisement to which they have called my attention, and 2nd, to demand an apology

to the College and to myself from the publishers of the work, of the existence of which I was not aware until the receipt of your letter of Mrch 4th.¹²

Alec Cooke, in his lively chapter focusing on Osler's supposed breach of the rules of advertising, summarised the sequel:

At the Comitia held on 6 April the Treasurer, Sir Dyce Duckworth, addressed the College at some length on the *Family Encyclopaedia of Medicine*. He expressed his extreme surprise and regret that the names of Fellows should have occurred in those advertisements, which had appeared not only in newspapers but had been carried about the streets by sandwich-men ... Though it was a relief that this had been done without their sanction, he was astonished that the Fellows ... had not obtained an injunction.⁶

Osler, who attended this meeting, put his case that the College should act. For this he had no support, and he wrote that evening from the nearby Athenæum Club resigning his fellowship (Figure 4).

When Harvey Cushing published his biography of Osler in 1925, in the lifetime of both Sir Thomas Barlow, the 1914 College President, and of Sir Dyce Duckworth, he quoted Osler's contemporary private notes:

At the College meeting to-day (6th) I raised the question of the responsibility of the College to defend its members. D- [Duckworth] made a Pecksniffian address in which he said the honour of the College had been drawn into the mud. P- [Sir Richard Douglas Powell, ex-President] said 'it was not customary for the C to defend individual members. The President asked if the C wished to take any action – no reply. I have sent in my resignation as a protest against this attitude...

April 10th: The day after my resignation the President called me up by telephone and asked if he could come and see me the next day ... I saw Barlow in town yesterday and talked over the whole business. He much regretted D-'s remarks and explained why it was impossible for the College to take up the matter. Very reluctantly I agreed to withdraw my resignation.¹³

An exceptionally literate doctor, Osler could hardly have chosen a more condemnatory epithet for Duckworth than Pecksniff from Charles Dickens' 1844 novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'Pecksniffian' as describing an unctuous hypocrite, talking much of beneficence. In his book, Dickens also made Pecksniff plagiarise the architecture of his pupil Martin Chuzzlewit; the novel was, of course, also influential in the much later reform of nursing by its lampooning of the alcoholic Mrs Sarah Gamp.

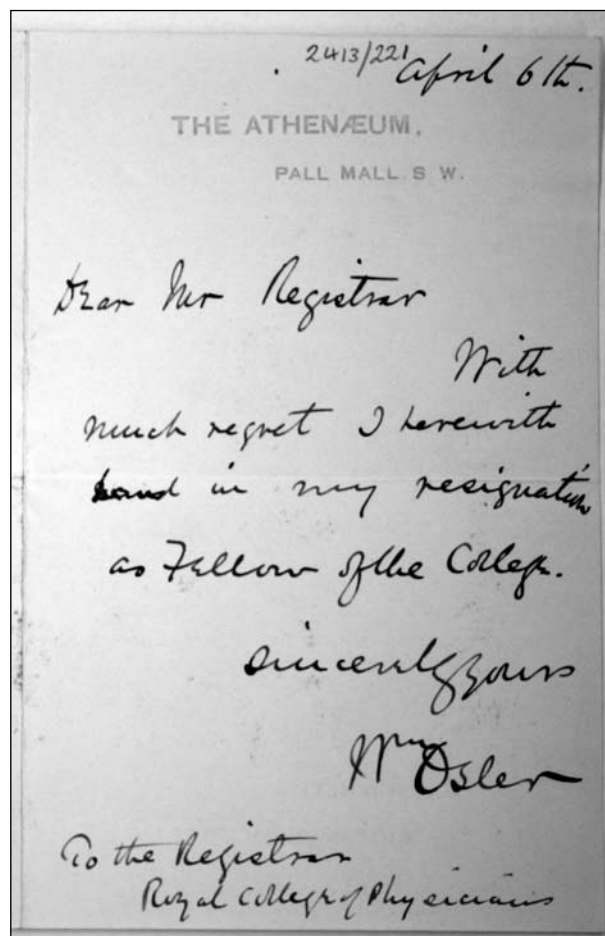


FIGURE 4 Sir William Osler's resignation of Fellowship. (Reproduced with permission of the Royal College of Physicians of London)

Despite this, as Cooke concluded,⁶ no bad blood remained between the College and Osler; Sir Thomas Barlow (1845–1945) had been a good peacemaker.

SIR DYCE DUCKWORTH

Sir Dyce, who blew the whistle on the Riddle publication after seeing the advertisement in the *Daily Mail*, was 74 at the time, had been College Treasurer since 1884 and would remain so until 1923 when he was 83, a total of 39 years. An Edinburgh graduate, he became physician at St Bartholomew's Hospital, London. When he died, aged 88, his immediate obituarists in *The Lancet* and the *British Medical Journal* were polite, stressing his conservatism and objection to women in medicine.

The later eulogies in *Munk's Roll*¹⁴ and the *Dictionary of National Biography*¹⁵ were more critical, but not to the extent of Osler's 'Pecksniffian' in the heat of the moment in 1914. They stressed Duckworth's dislike of change in general, emancipation in particular, and his 'sometimes pompous dignity'.¹⁴ Garrod damned with faint praise by describing Duckworth's 'strong sense of propriety ... [and] many minor contributions to medical literature'.¹⁵

But, on the credit side, Duckworth had opposed, together with Joseph Lister, Florence Nightingale's perverse vetoing of the registration of nurses, which prevailed until ten years after her death.¹⁶

DR HUGH HOWARD RIDDLE

An account of Dr Riddle, the other protagonist, is less straightforward than that of Duckworth, and data are sparse. *Alumni Cantabrigienses* records his birth as the son of a colonel at Erie, Pennsylvania in the United States on 30 September 1873 and his education as follows: St Paul's School, Concord, then Yale College and matriculated at Peterhouse, Cambridge, in 1895, BA 1898, MB and BChir 1910, MD 1912.¹⁷ Peterhouse, however, dates Riddle's MB to 1902, the year when he also became MD Pennsylvania.¹⁸ His 1912 Cambridge MD thesis was entitled 'A comparison of natural and artificial salt-waters in therapeutics' and is no longer extant, but the Cambridge MD committee wrote in its minutes: 'This thesis describes the results of treatment of patients suffering from summer diarrhoea in 1911. The author concludes that sea water injections are more valuable. The thesis is based on very extensive and careful observations.'¹⁹

Riddle's *Family Encyclopaedia of Medicine*, with its two-page list of supposed contributors, was his only book published in Britain. His introduction sounds genuine enough in its wish to enlighten the populace on medical matters beyond the paternalistic fragments of information given out by the doctors of the time. He cites the delay in cancer treatment caused by patients' ignorance, and the dreadful 12,690 deaths from measles in 1912 in England and Wales, in the hope that his 2,640 well-illustrated pages would help in this respect. Almost a century on, the *Family Encyclopaedia* still reads well and is suited to a lay readership. Its description of diseases conforms to classical texts of the period, but the therapeutics are obviously very dated. It ends with a list of the specialised hospitals in London.

In the Yale *1898 Quindecennial Reunion Publication*²⁰ (of 1915) Riddle features, presumably in his own words, as 'employed on the *Daily Mail*, London, as medical expert. He married Christine Brown in 1910 and has one son.' Despite the controversies of 1914, he was not struck off, and was in the *Medical Register* until 1921. The *Medical Directory* listed him until 1930, giving no more than his qualifications and a Chelsea address. This author has failed to find later publications or an obituary.

Riddle probably deserves notice as a pioneer medical correspondent in the popular press, who was possibly caught up in Lord Northcliffe's 1911 campaign to improve the health of the nation.

THE ROLE OF THE RCPL

The College, which was the storm centre of the row in 1914, a few months before the First World War, had no deterrents for perceived misuse of publicity and self-advertisement except withdrawal of its membership and fellowship. Three years earlier, in 1911, there had been a vicarious brush with Lord Northcliffe when he quoted support for his standard wholemeal bread campaign from 84 Fellows, Members and Licentiatees of the College. They were rebuked by the Censors' Board for participating in interviews on professional subjects with reporters of the lay press.²¹

In 1914 the College declined to take action on behalf of its own wrongly accused, citing lack of precedents.⁶ The 'contributors', led by Dawson, failed to stop the continuing publication of the fortnightly paper, but may have attenuated the advertising by leaning on their patients in the publishing world. Any legal action against Lord Northcliffe and his press would probably have failed. Two years later he was sufficiently potent to bring about the replacement of Asquith by Lloyd George as prime minister.⁴

Volume three of the official *College History*²¹ of the RCPL noted an earlier real offence of publishing in the lay press; Sir Morrell Mackenzie, an eminent member and founder of laryngology, was persuaded to resign his College membership because of his best-selling book *The Fatal Illness of Frederick the Noble*,²² which appeared a few months after the death in 1888 from laryngeal cancer of his patient, the German Emperor Frederick III. Mackenzie's book was designed to refute accusations of mismanagement by the German medical establishment. The row had an international dimension as Mackenzie had been encouraged to publish by his patient's widow, Queen Victoria's eldest daughter, who had warned him of the risks of flouting 'medical etiquette'.²³ The RCPL's ban on lay publishing had already come into force in February 1888.

In 1893 Sir D'Arcy Power wrote in the *Dictionary of National Biography* of Mackenzie's 'violent and unseemly quarrel', referring to 'insinuations unworthy of the high positions of the contending parties ... published details which should have been kept secret ... publication due to representations from influential quarters ... a singularly injudicious treatise'.²⁴

The College's position in a not dissimilar case of posthumous publicity of clinical data was much more difficult in 1966 when Lord Moran, its longest serving and politically most influential modern president, published *Winston Churchill – the Struggle for Survival*,²⁵ despite explicit objections from Lady Churchill and her family. The British Medical Association, Lord Brain and many other leaders of the profession were openly censorious, but Moran claimed Churchill's own agreement to his project

and the special case of a great historical figure.² There is no record of an official College reaction in 1966.^{26,27} (A more proper interval was observed for Russell Brain's account of Churchill's medical history,²⁸ that is, 35 years.)

THE GENERAL MEDICAL COUNCIL AND ADVERTISING

Advertising has been one of the concerns of the General Medical Council (GMC) since its establishment in the middle of the nineteenth century. The supposed offence by Osler et al. in 1914 was noted by the GMC at once, to judge by Allbutt's letters to the College Registrar, in which he praised the GMC for being more sympathetic than the College to the victims of the misattribution by Riddle and the *Daily Mail*. The GMC's intolerance of real advertising lasted well into the twentieth century, but was more and more undermined by the increasing power of the press, and later of radio and television. Understandably, the media have championed the right for patients and the public to know all.

Fletcher¹ in 1973 edited a Rock Carling Fellowship treatise, *Communication in Medicine*, with his own chapter on 'The mass media and the medical profession'. He started by quoting Osler's warning to the New York Academy of Medicine in 1897:

In the life of every successful physician there comes a temptation to toy with the Delilah of the press – daily and otherwise. There are times when she may be courted with satisfaction, but beware. Sooner or later she is sure to play the harlot and has left many a man shorn of his strength, viz: the confidence of his professional brethren.²⁹

Fletcher had clearly come to disagree with this, and has himself contributed to the climate of greater openness. And the modern ability of the public to gather information about medical issues, facilities and practitioners has made a nonsense of the old restrictions on medical publicity.

Accordingly, GMC rules on advertising have become increasingly relaxed. In its 2001 version of *Good Medical Practice*, the three relevant paragraphs in this regard are headed 'Providing information about your services':

48. If you publish information about services you provide, the information must be factual and verifiable. It must be published in a way that conforms with the law and with the guidance issued by the Advertising Standards Authority.

49. The information you publish must not make unjustifiable claims about the quality of your services. It must not, in any way, offer guarantees of cures, nor exploit patients' vulnerability or lack of medical knowledge.

50. Information you publish about your services must not put pressure on people to use a service, for example by arousing ill-founded fears about their future health. Similarly you must not advertise your services by visiting or telephoning prospective patients, either in person or through a deputy.³⁰

But the GMC did still subsequently act over advertising: for example, a cosmetic surgeon was struck off the Medical Register for failing to observe this guidance and other misdemeanours in 2003; similarly in 2005 a hair-restoring cosmetic doctor was erased and in 2006 an ophthalmic surgeon was suspended for 12 months.

However, the latest edition of the GMC's *Good Medical Practice* (October 2006) has now introduced 'publishing' into the heading 'Providing information and publishing about your services'; it has dropped from the first paragraph the reference to conformity with the law and with the Advertising Standards Authority. In the third paragraph, advertising by visiting and phoning prospective patients has also been dropped.³¹ It would seem that advertising is now in order with the GMC.

CONCLUSION

The past one hundred years have seen a great widening of information to the public, particularly in the field of medicine. Whatever Lord Northcliffe's motives may have been in 1914, his Harmsworth publications initiated a very proper spread of medical knowledge to the laity. The growth of investigative journalism, which goes back at least to WH Russell in the Crimean war, has also increasingly satisfied the curiosity of the public about the ailments of prominent people and their management by the doctors, for better or worse. And all this has been magnified by the advent of radio and television, and more recently by the internet.

This has made a nonsense of the secretive habits of our forebears, and the 'freedom of information' has been enshrined by the legislators. The implicit threat to the privacy of the individual is only tangentially protected by the laws of libel.

However, a recurrence of the 1914 rumpus over Riddle's *Family Encyclopaedia of Medicine* has become inconceivable; the 'disreputable' methods employed by him and his publishers would now barely cause a shrug.

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RESEARCH TRAINING AND THE YOUNG CLINICIAN

Wednesday, 18 March 2009

The organising committee chaired by Professor John Iredale has put together this symposium aimed at all junior doctors, particularly those interested in undertaking research and those keen on pursuing an academic career.

The morning session will cover topics on research careers and research funding, and the afternoon session will consist of workshops on specific research needs.

Session 1: Constructing a research career

- The importance of research in clinical training
- Managing the parallel careers of clinical medicine and academic medicine

Session 2: Research funding

- Medical Research Council
- Wellcome Trust
- How to get a research training fellowship
- The view from the trenches – real-life experience

Session 3: Workshop sessions to include

Going abroad; Academic careers and flexible training; Patient-orientated research; Mentorship – what does it mean and why is it important?

Session 4: Workshop reports

Reports from each session will be fed back to the audience

Venue: Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh

Full details on the conference, including registration, can be obtained from:

<http://www.rcpe.ac.uk/education/events/index.php>

or by contacting

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