

Dⁿ Burt

STATEMENT

REGARDING THE

Existing Deficiency of Medical Practitioners in the Highlands and Islands: being the Substance of a Report presented to the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh by a Committee appointed to make inquiries on the subject.

[Ordered by the College to be printed.—3d August 1852.]

For many years, it has been generally known that the north and north-western districts of Scotland have been very imperfectly supplied with Practitioners of Medicine and Surgery. Two years ago, the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh appointed a Committee to obtain exact information on this subject, and to point out, if possible, some means for lessening the evil in question.

In pursuance of this inquiry, the Committee issued a set of queries to various parties (chiefly Ministers of Parishes) resident in 170 Parishes of the Counties of Argyll, Bute, Inverness, Ross, Sutherland, Caithness, Orkney and Shetland. Returns have been received from 155 Parishes. From these returns it appears that 62 Parishes are adequately supplied with Medical Practitioners, 52 partially supplied, and 41 rarely, if ever, visited by any regular Practitioner.

The returns further shew, (1.) that in, or near the 52 partially supplied Parishes, (containing together, according to the census of 1841, a population of 80,967,) there are about

70 Medical Practitioners, the practice of some of whom appears to extend over vast districts of country. (2.) That the 41 destitute Parishes (containing together a population of 34,361) are situated chiefly in Ross, Sutherland, and the Islands. (3.) That the deficiency of properly qualified Practitioners is much felt and complained of in some districts, less so in others, although similarly circumstanced; and that, throughout the 93 inadequately supplied Parishes generally, there is much suffering from disease and from accidental injuries, that might be remedied were proper help at hand.* (4.) That the existing deficiency of duly-qualified Practitioners is compensated in many Parishes (particularly in Shetland) by the Ministers themselves giving advice and medicine; while, in a few places, there are proprietors and factors on large estates, who, having studied medicine in their youth, benevolently exert their skill on behalf of their sick neighbours. In some remote districts, the Midwife is the only person who undertakes the treatment of disease. From a few Parishes there are complaints of there being not even a Midwife.

In reply to the query—"Does your experience enable you to suggest any measure of general applicability,—such as would be likely to relieve, to some extent, the evils (if they exist) of deficiency in the supply of medical aid?"—the following suggestions have been presented by various reporters:—

1. That Government should be applied to for a grant of money sufficient to give Salaries to Medical Practitioners locating themselves in the districts now destitute.

* Such language as the following occurs frequently in the returns, indicative of the deep sense entertained by the reporters of the evils, of which they are daily witnesses, arising from the want of medical aid:—

"I cannot express in strong enough terms the lamentable condition of this parish, and certainly there is a loud call for something being done. There is no doubt that human life is often sacrificed by reason of the want of medical aid."

"I have, with extreme pain, seen many cases of protracted suffering, where medical aid might have been of service, had it been possible to have obtained it."

2. That Government should be requested to place some of the Medical Officers of the Navy and Army, now on half-pay, in the destitute parishes.

3. That, in connexion with any measure that may be adopted for the relief of the existing destitution, the use of a few small steam-ships should be added, in which the Practitioners might be conveyed to the more distant localities, at certain fixed times, where and when the sick, able to travel, might rendezvous to meet them.

4. That the proprietors generally should be requested to allow Medical Practitioners the use of small farms in convenient localities, on which suitable houses might be erected at the public expense; or, otherwise, that a general Land-Tax should be established for the support of, at least, one Medical Practitioner in each parish.*

5. That small hospitals for the sick should be erected in some of the more populous districts.

6. That a benevolent Association should be formed for the purpose of supplying medical aid to the Highlands and Islands, in the way of furnishing the existing Practitioners (or, where there are none, the Ministers) with medicines, &c., for the poor, not receiving parish relief; partly in the way of giving some of the people themselves a complete medical education, and training a few of the women as nurses and midwives.

7. That Mutual Assurance Societies for securing medical aid to their members, should be formed in the badly supplied districts.

* It is in the way of allowing the Practitioners pieces of land for grazing horse and cow, and giving houses free, that encouragement is now given for well qualified men to settle in remote localities. Were it not for the generosity of some of the larger proprietors (amongst whom His Grace the Duke of Sutherland has especially distinguished himself) exercised in this way, many more large districts would be quite destitute.

8. That, with a view to prepare for ulterior measures, a deputation of properly qualified persons should be sent to the destitute districts, that the exact state of matters may be seen, and fully reported on.

With regard to the position of the medical men who practise in or near the imperfectly supplied districts, the following facts have been ascertained :—

That, of 53 of these, from whom returns have been received, 12 have been in practice for ten years, or between ten and twenty years ; 12 for twenty years, or between twenty and thirty years ; 8 for thirty years, and 1 for fifty-six years. Most of these gentlemen report the length of their ordinary daily rounds at from three to fourteen miles, and their greatest distances at from ten to one hundred miles ; almost all travel on horseback generally ; 16 make use of wheeled conveyances partially, and 17 are obliged to take boats daily. Three only report the entire absence of roads in the districts which they traverse, and these are in Orkney and Shetland ; 7 complain of the roads being very bad ; but by all the others, the state of the roads is said to be excellent. With regard to the status presently enjoyed by the Highland Practitioners compared with what it was some years ago, 26 report it as unchanged, 15 as being improved, (chiefly under the operation of the new Poor-Law,) and only 12 as being worse than it was ; but so many as 28 complain of the great inadequacy of the remuneration received ; in some places, two-thirds of the people pay nothing, in others, the proportion of gratis to paying patients is at 19 to one. Only 4 gentlemen state that they have no complaint to make ; all the rest appear to regard their lot as a hard one ; and complain, some of the hardships and dangers to which they are necessarily exposed in travelling great distances by sea and land in all weathers, over bad roads and in crazy boats ; others of the want of improving society ; others of the interference of unqualified

Practitioners ; and a few of the harsh treatment they experience at the hands of the parochial authorities.

There are, probably, few men in any situation, who undergo greater hardships in the discharge of professional duty, so continuously, and with so little prospect of reward, than do these Highland Practitioners. Many of them appear to be actuated by true philanthropy, doing their best, in the most unfavourable possible circumstances, to manifest the benevolent spirit of their profession, and to confer the blessings of its science on the poorest of our fellow-countrymen. Strong testimony is borne by several of the reporters to their indefatigable, zealous, and self-denying labours, and much regret is expressed that they are, for the most part, very poorly remunerated. "I must state," writes one clergyman, "that I know no class of men more extensively or more actively charitable than Medical Practitioners in the Highlands." Another remarks—"I know of no class of men more inadequately remunerated than the Medical Practitioners of the Highlands, or who obtain a livelihood at a greater sacrifice of time and of labour."

The following practical inferences may be drawn from the facts and statements contained in the returns :—

1. That, in several districts, and these, perhaps, scattered pretty equally over the whole range of the Highlands and Islands, there is such a lack of medical aid, as exposes the people in these districts to the risk of far greater suffering and fatality than are experienced amongst their more highly favoured fellow-countrymen in the south.

2. According to the population returns of 1841, the number of persons who never receive, and cannot, without great expense, at any time receive the benefit of medical aid, amounts to about 34,300 ; while those who receive it occasionally are in number about 90,000, making a total of 124,300 persons inadequately supplied. Doubtless, the numbers of these are

almost daily becoming less by emigration ; but it may be presumed that about 116,000 people, scattered over wide and rugged districts, are, at this moment, most imperfectly provided for in sickness.

3. This destitution is at once a consequence and a proof of the miserably depressed social state of the Highlands. With the economics of that state, a College of Physicians has not a direct concern ; but, whether the physical well-being of the people at large be considered, or the interests of the professional brethren who share the privations of the poor Highlanders, and help them to the best of their ability, it is conceived that the simple facts now brought out afford a sufficient apology for the College having made this attempt to bring the subject under the consideration of the public.

4. The past history and present circumstances of Highland destitution forbid the hope that any such improvement in the social state of the people will be brought about within the present generation, as will enable them to provide medical aid for themselves ; and, therefore, if relief is to be given at all, it must be from without.

5. While the operation of the new Poor-Law has, in some measure, improved the condition of the existing medical men, and contributed to lessen the evils of deficiency of medical aid, it has also produced the anomaly of the very poor, who are recipients of parish-aid, receiving more attention than those who are in comparatively independent circumstances, although unable to pay for medical aid.

6. Greater security would be given to the lives of the many visitors and travellers who now annually traverse the Highlands, were the number of properly qualified Surgeons increased in these districts.

7. The scourge of small-pox may be kept in check by an increase of vaccinators in the Highlands, as it appears that many of the inhabitants are not protected by vaccination, so

that, when they come into the Lowlands, they are peculiarly liable to suffer from small-pox : which fact is so well known to them that it not unfrequently prevents the poor from leaving home to seek for employment.

In name, &c.,

J. Y. SIMPSON, *President*.

ALEX^R. WOOD, *Secretary*.

N.B.—The full Report, with the answers to the returns, may be inspected on application to the Officer at the Physicians' Hall, Queen Street. It is requested that all communications on the subject may be addressed to DR. COLDSTREAM, Convener of the Committee.