

uncontested elections as a sign of content with the present representatives on the Council, why not assume the same thing in reference to the small attendance at the Division meetings? A practical test of the representative quality of the Council may help to convince Dr. Walker. As President of this Branch, which is not the least active in the Association, I have been present at the meetings of four Divisions recently, and I have taken the trouble to ask whether those present knew who were their Representatives on the Council. In an aggregate attendance of about sixty I found two who could tell me correctly. In twenty years (and probably in a much longer period) there has only been one contested election in this Branch. If my readers apply the same test to their own Branches I think the result will surprise them. The fact is that before the reorganization of the Association, the members of Council were put on mainly for their professional standing or their official connexion with their Branch. Since the reorganization any interest in the election of members of Council (such as it was) has been transferred to the election of members of the Representative Meeting, except in the Metropolitan Counties and the Lancashire and Cheshire Branches. There is, of course, no need for the Council to be composed of Representatives at all, as that body has recognized by not taking a Referendum on the Ordinance which transforms it into the executive body of the Representative Meeting with the power of Referendum. By doing this they have agreed that we cannot afford to have two legislative bodies, with the accompanying friction, in the Association, and it is to be expected that after this merely time-wasting Referendum is over they will settle down to the enjoyment of that position of power and respect in the Association which must inevitably be occupied by the body selected as the best business and executive men in the Association.—I am, etc.,

Gateshead, Nov. 4th.

ALFRED COX.

SIR,—Dr. Fothergill, in his interesting and very long but not very convincing letter in the JOURNAL of October 26th, has carefully evaded the other issue I put forward, which I thought of quite equal importance to the fixity of the constitution of the Central Council, namely, to preserve the right of the individual member, quite apart from his position as a member of a Division or Branch. No doubt Dr. Fothergill and his friends would like this subject kept in the background and not discussed at all after the events at Exeter, for with their usual astuteness they made use of the opportunities at hand.

Look at the way the annual general meeting of members was dealt with at Exeter. It is understood that the Representative Meeting cannot be held until the proceedings commence by the annual business meeting taking place, even in a kind of dumb show. And this is how it was done: There was no Chairman of Council present to take the chair, nor even the Treasurer of the Association, with the result that it was adjourned until, I believe, the Monday or Tuesday, so that if one or a number of members had attended at the first meeting for some special purpose they would have had to wait until the adjourned meeting was held. And why was this adjournment? This is answered by what actually took place on the Tuesday. It suited the active party, and enabled them to effect such a coup as was never exceeded in the annals of the Association, and never will be, namely: a Treasurer was elected in opposition to the one which had been nominated by the Central Council! This transaction will never be forgotten by those who were present, and especially the two gentlemen who were nominated.

Well, now, does it not look rather curious that the same party should make such an exceedingly powerful use of the annual meeting of members to effect their own purpose, and yet they should have it on the card in the draft Charter that it should be abolished? And why is this? They see that it can be made a powerful weapon if required by a clique, as was exemplified by themselves, and so they have taken good care that their opponents shall never have this power. They are fencing themselves in and round about, so that they can effect their own purposes without let or hindrance!

Hence the long letter of Dr. Fothergill in defence of the election of the Central Council as per Charter; and not a single word in defence of the abolition of the privileges of

members at the annual business meeting! As he has said nothing in favour of maintaining it we must conclude that he is in favour of abolishing it, as his friends are.—I am, etc.,

Manchester, Nov. 2nd.

G. H. BROADBENT.

*The Opinion of the British Medical Association.*

SIR,—It is somewhat unfortunate that the present discussion has so largely resolved itself into a debate as to which is the more representative body in the Association without a fundamental definition of that which it is desired to represent—the opinion of the British Medical Association. The Association may be said to consist of three—in part overlapping—groups: members who wish for a good medical journal, members who are keenly interested in the scientific possibilities of the organization, and members who are keenly interested in the economic and political relations of the profession. The opinion of the British Medical Association on any question is a resultant of the twenty thousand various opinions of the individual members on that question, and what one is entitled to present to the public as the recognized opinion of the Association is a conventional result arrived at in some way provided by the constituted mechanism.

Prior to 1900 the mechanism was the fortuitous course of the Annual General Meeting and the Council, consisting of Branch Representatives who were elected without any constitutional responsibility to their constituents on individual questions. At the new constitution this mechanism was definitely replaced by a new grouping of members in such Divisions that, as far as possible, any member who wished had the possibility of attending their meetings made as practicable as local opinion thought necessary, and by the Representative Meeting, consisting of members who are constitutionally required to represent the known opinion of their group. Which of these mechanisms is the more likely to give the more accurate statement of the resultant opinion of the members? That is the question of which we are substantially engaged in discussion. On theoretical grounds there would be little difficulty in coming to a decision, but we must always test the most perfectly designed mechanism by its work in practice, and this test was applied to the old mechanism when it was overthrown by the new, and at present we must attempt to judge of the work of the new. This, it is urged, has failed in so far as the members of the Representative Meeting are appointed by a minority, and that a small one, of their respective Divisions, and that, in effect, their opinions are not authoritative. That the appointment is actually made by a minority of the constituency may be admitted; but it is still made by the tacit consent of the whole, for surely any member who felt keenly enough on any question to make him resent being misrepresented would, to prevent such a calamity, attend the meeting which is held at his own door, and surely the critics of the present authority of the representative mandate will hardly go so far as to assert that if the Division elections were made by voting paper the Representatives who are at present appointed would not be returned by much the same proportion of votes as are now cast in a disputed election to the Council.

The fact that the local group is relatively small surely makes it likely that a more reasoned and homogeneous opinion is ready to be expressed, and also that any man of the group is more likely to know the general feeling of his colleagues than if the groups were larger, and I cannot but think that Dr. Walker's constituents were most unfortunate, if his acquaintance with the opinion of his professional neighbours was limited to the scanty constitutional information which he states was put at his disposal. For these and other reasons too numerous to state in detail I cannot resist the conclusion that, with all its defects, the system of Divisions and Representative Meeting does give a reasonable approximation to what can be presented as the opinion of the British Medical Association, and that any larger grouping with the necessarily increased difficulty of attending meetings would give a less accurate rendering.

The detailed questions on which the voting is taking place centre in the purely economic question of the most efficient size of the Council, a reduction of which involves the regrouping of the Branches and of the arrangements

for closer interworking between the legislative and the executive organizations. So far as the discussion has gone it seems that the main objection urged against any regrouping is that the Branches are to be destroyed. But—and I speak as a member of a grouped Branch—I should be loth to admit that my Branch had no end in life save to elect a member of the Council, and it seems to occur to me that I have heard of Branches which have done useful scientific work and of others which made effective play in local professional economics, and so long as this is so the question for each Branch will not be that of its continued existence but the most effective local organization for those purposes which awake its interests.—I am, etc.,

Dundee, Nov. 4th.

R. C. BURST.

#### COUNTRY MEMBERS OF THE BRITISH MEDICAL ASSOCIATION.

SIR,—The various letters to the JOURNAL upon the subject of the Referendum and Dr. Larking's paper as printed in the SUPPLEMENT of November 2nd have suggested to me that it is time that some one should say a word in defence of the very large class of country members, who seem to be standing a very good chance of being left out in the cold. I could wish that some worthier champion than myself had been found to do this, but perhaps there may be others to back me up. Most of the letters appear to be from town members who have, perhaps, a short train or tram ride from their own homes to the meeting places of the various Branches and Divisions. But do they stop to consider what it is to be in the country with very poor train service, possibly none at all within reasonable distance? How would they feel if to attend a meeting meant leaving home and practice for half a day, perhaps even having to stay away for the night? Would they be so regular in attendance if your Manchester members, say, had their meeting-place at Crewe or Shrewsbury, or your London members at, say, Winchfield or Aldershot? And this means leaving no one in charge of the practice, as the next doctor may be 5 to 10 miles away. It seems to me very unfair to accuse us wholesale of apathy and lack of interest. There must be many men who would like to do something and who take the deepest interest in the work of the Association, but who under the present constitution are quite powerless, owing to inability to attend meetings. Making all members of the Association members of the Division in which they live was a step in the right direction; but we must, like Oliver Twist, ask for more. As a concrete instance I will take my own case. I have been a member of the South Carnarvon and Merioneth Division of the North Wales Branch for six years, and during that time there has been no Division meeting nearer than 15 miles. This summer the North Wales Branch annual meeting was held at Machynlleth. I went in hope of meeting other members and hearing questions of importance and interest discussed, but the time was mostly spent in listening to papers that were of great medical interest, but would have been better printed in the BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL and read at home. Besides, most of the audience had to leave to catch the train before the papers were finished.

I know that in the country districts everyone cannot be considered, and the meetings should be held where it is convenient for the majority, but it is decidedly annoying to be called apathetic and indifferent. Is there any great difficulty in having the resolutions to be proposed printed and sent to the members, so that they can vote by letter if not able to attend the meetings? As things are now the country members have practically no share in the business or conduct of the Association, and almost the only object in belonging to it at all is to receive every week the valuable JOURNAL. With Dr. Larking's paper I agree mostly, but I cannot with him "think it is a mistake to give a vote to a man who, by failure to attend meetings, has not heard the questions argued from both sides of view." The questions could hardly be argued more fully than they are in the columns of the JOURNAL. It is hard to be disfranchised because one happens to live where it is not possible to attend meetings. I am hoping and trusting that before long all this may be altered, and we may have some practical interest in the business of the Association. Until then it is useless to think of a united profession every member of which will belong to the British Medical Association. I hope that our town members will bear in

mind the position of their country brothers, and not condemn them wholesale for their apparent lack of interest. I hope this letter will induce some influential member to champion the cause of the apparently apathetic country member.—I am, etc.,

Aberdovey, Nov. 3rd.

F. S. JACKSON.

#### THE GENERAL PRACTITIONER AND THE ASSOCIATION.

SIR,—I am not, and have never been, a general practitioner; my position of virtually complete detachment leaves me personally unaffected by the disadvantages and disabilities under which the bulk of the profession labour; but I am fully cognizant of the widespread discontent which exists among great numbers both of those within and those without the Association. The latter class have no right to find fault with the Association; they ought to join and make their voices heard. They do, however, grumble, and ask what is the Association doing to improve their lot? With one of these men during the last few days I have had a talk. He said, "It is no doubt very easy to be satisfied with things as they are when one is earning £5,000 a year, or holding a comfortable service or Government post, easy to forget the seamy side of professional life when absorbed in scientific experiment or research. The men who ought to lead forget us, not so much from selfishness as from preoccupation in the pressing business of their own lives." General practitioners are more and more becoming alive to the fact that whilst the State demands from them a higher standard of qualification, obtained at greater sacrifice than is demanded in other professions, the law affords them no protection and no real privilege whatever.

Practitioners find that the bread is taken out of their mouths by fraudulent quacks who plunder the poorer classes and leave them often with empty pockets, to seek the gratuitous services of qualified men under one or another form of charity. Practitioners know that the working classes are robbed annually of a vast sum by quack medicine vendors, many of whom make of this traffic a cloak for illicit practice, and they realize that, whilst they are thus deprived of legitimate income, the law allows the infliction upon the simple public of an amount of suffering far outweighing in importance the loss they themselves endure.

General practitioners, as I can testify, are gradually appreciating the fact that the case for medical law reform needs only full statement, backed by the incontrovertible evidence available, in order to claim the attention of our legislators and force them to action. Dr. Arthur E. Larking, in his paper published in the Supplement of November 2nd, suggests that satisfaction may, among other things, be found in the fact that "the Association has drafted the Medical Acts Amendment Bill." "It is," he says, "a most important matter, and will when passed be a great blessing to our profession. It would be hopeless to attempt to pass a Bill of this kind unless supported by a great Association like ours." No one will dispute the last statement, but it would have been much more satisfactory if Dr. Larking could have told us that there existed under prevailing circumstances the remotest probability of such a Bill being taken up by the present or any succeeding Government. No private member could carry through such a measure; it is doubtful whether he could gain a hearing for it. If a medical member introduced it, it would be destroyed at once by its enemies as a mere trades-union dodge. If the Association will bend its energies to the public demonstration of the case for medical-law reform it will soon become evident that success is in view. General practitioners who now hold aloof will then flock in, add their personal weight to that of their fellows, and by their subscriptions and donations will provide the funds needed to carry the matter onwards to a triumphant close.—I am, etc.,

November 2nd.

HENRY SEWILL.

#### ALCOHOLISM AND HOBNAIL LIVER.

SIR,—In your issue of November 2nd Dr. Donkin draws attention to the prominence usually given to alcoholism as a cause of cirrhosis, and incidentally refers to my (repeated) doubt as to the existence of relationship between the two conditions.

Without attempting to express any definite opinion as to real causation, I may perhaps be permitted to con-