Correspondence.

THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE.

Sir,—In the second notice of Dr. Neuberger's History of Medicine the author is said to assert that: "In the Hippocratic Oath, the highest ethical standard of antiquity, the physician is enjoined to refuse to give his aid to the incurable. On the other hand, Christianity made it a moral duty for a doctor to give the benefit of his skill even in such cases."

There is no such injunction in the oath, and the statement seems rather a libel on the ancient physicians. For, though the rhetorical author of the De Arte, who was physician, not a physician, most probably states that medicine does not take in hand incurable diseases, this seems merely his way of saying that a scientific physician recognizes the supremacy of natural causation and claims no supernatural power.

It may be a hit at the temple miracles, so strangely ignored by all the Hippocratic writers, and it is certainly palatable with the famous saying of Herophilus, "The most perfect physician is he who distinguishes between the possible and the impossible." and with Plato's remark that the wise physician, like the wise pilot, "knows intuitively his own powers, and attempts only what is within their limits." (Republic, p. 361). That the ancient physician was enjoined to do his best, even for incurable patients, is evident enough from the De Articulis, § 58, that refers to the loss of reputation incurred among the vulgar; and that he did not avoid patients unlikely to recover, or even the publication of his failures, is clear from the cases recorded in the Hippocratic collection, the great majority of which end fatally. On the other hand, the danger and disgrace which may be incurred by undertaking desperate cases and the advisability of refusing to have anything to do with them are commonplaces of medieval medical writings, though, doubtless, doctors of all ages and religions have considered it a moral duty to relieve suffering so far as they were able.—I am, etc.,

E. T. WITHINGTON.

Dr. Burgess of Hoylake, and Dr. R. J. Ryle have also written to us on this subject. We wrote in our haste, and the error is the less excusable since we published an article on the Hippocratic Oath, in which the full text was given, in the Journal, May 4th, 1912 (p. 1039). The passage referred to is in De Arte, which is included among the Hippocratic writings. We quote what was said in the article: "Apparently the Hippocratic physician deduces from this realization of the limits of art—a conclusion foreign to our ideas—that help should be withheld from the incurable. Medicine is to him the art whereby sufferers may be entirely freed from their ailments and subjected to death by disease mortal; if they are refused to those persons who are already overwhelmed by illness, since it is clear that in such cases art can effect nothing." (The quotation is from Neuberger.) This teaching held sway to the Middle Ages, and probably much later. Mondeville expressly enjoins his pupils not to undertake difficult or hopeless cases, on the ground that this would damage their reputation.

THE MENTAL DEFICIENCY BILL.

Sir,—Your temperate leading article of August 24th emboldens me to offer a few explanations.

1. Only an inadequate and therefore misleading report of my paper has appeared in the press reports of the Catholic Congress. If you were willing to print the paper it might provide a platform of discussion for those who wish to see all the data of a difficult subject. If this is impossible your readers might be glad to have a sober scientific statement of the exceeding ignorance.

2. We admit a "problem" of feeble-mindedness, inasmuch as feeble-mindedness is often coupled with neglect, cruelty, or destitution. But we do not agree with the view that certain of these problems are more largely economic or ethical, should receive a drastically eugenic solution.

3. The vexed question of "natural rights," to which so much of your leading article was devoted, is not essentially medical, but ethical. It requires a fuller and more expert treatment than I can command in this letter.

4. The leading article admitted that the definitions of the bill are defective, and that eugenists (whose theories are the theories of the bill) are divided in their view. But we merely add to this frank admission the wish that until fuller knowledge is reached punitive legislation should be stayed.

The bill has already passed its second reading. No authoritative body has been so alert to the medical, economic, social, legal, and ethical principles at stake as the National Catholic Congress at its recent session, and it is probably safe to say that only a body with forensic knowledge could have condemned the bill. And as the bill was like to be hurried through Parliament, the condemnation had to be loud enough to be heard.—I am, etc.,

VINCENT M'NABB.

Sir,—I hope that the controversy into which you have entered with Dr. Mooney will be continued by other disputants, and that the medical profession will consider seriously the position which will be created by the Mental Deficiency Bill should it ever happen to become an Act.

In your leader you state that this bill has "reached that part of the meeting with the approval of those who are interested in the social welfare of the people." I am afraid that these distinguished persons do not bring their approval very frequently before the public; for though Paris May 31st 1912, I happened by chance to read of the introduction of this bill, since my return to London I have met hardly any ordinary individual who has heard of it, much less learnt anything of its provisions.

It appears to me that your ready acceptance of this bill is akin to the error that has been perpetrated in so much of recent legislation—namely, a desire to take a short cut to the millenium. You say that "the eugenists are to-day mainly searching for fuller knowledge"; and everybody would be willing that they should do so in a reasonable manner. But if that search means an experiment by Act of Parliament before the eugenists have sufficiently completed their investigations or adequately formulated and expounded their views, I venture to think that the corpus vii of the public is justified in resenting their attentions.

I sincerely trust that I am right in thinking that even a latter-day House of Commons will decline to accept the absurd definition of feeble-minded persons given in the bill; and I hope that the subject will be investigated and discussed for a much longer time before the medical profession is called on to decide whether a person is capable of competing on equal terms with his fellow-countrymen.

CHAS. BUTTER.

FORCIBLE FEEDING OF SUFFERAGE PRISONERS.

Sir,—I strongly protest, as I did upon a former occasion, against Sir Victor Horsley who should be spared the opportunity to exploit their political views. Whatever reasons may be adduced as to the expediency in publishing preliminary reports, the statement, "Full details of what steps were sometimes taken by the officials in different prisons cannot be ascertained," conclusively proves this preliminary report to be chiefly founded upon ex parte evidence and rushed into print with the intention of creating party political animus, certainly contrary to the better interests of the Journal, its motto being, "Audis alteram partem." Interestingly as the results of the forcible feeding of suffrage prisoners may be, neither the statement that the Minister of the Crown nor the reasons which induced suffrage prisoners to refuse their food are topics for a purely non-political journal.—I am, etc.,

F. BROOME GILES.

Sir,—I am sure that all who have read the "report" on pp. 505-8 in the British Medical Journal of August 31st must feel greatly surprised and exasperated at the conduct of such medical men as Mr. Moulin and Sir Victor Horsley could conceivably and authorize a paper containing such grave charges against brother practitioners, and such a partisan and unscientific report. I imagine that certain of us are engaged in the study in order to ascertain, as long as the law exists which declares suicidal attempts a crime, so long must we agree that forcible feeding is emphatically necessary for people who adopt starving instead of a "bare bodkin," to threaten their existence, if