

A Merchant Looks at Medicine

By EDWARD A. FILENE

HEALING is a science. Some may insist that it is also an art, but the average modern doctor will accept the statement with serious reservations. There are too many "artists," he is likely to point out, assuming to heal the sick, not according to any scientific diagnosis nor any understanding of actual therapeutics, but according to the latest hunch of their own artistic temperaments. I wish to be excluded, then, from the horde of cheerful ignoramuses who stand ready at all times to tell the practitioners of medical science just what is wrong with their profession.

But healing, whether a mere art or a science, is also a business; and a business man need not apologize for looking that business over and expressing some doubts, if he develops any, as to its efficiency.

It seems to me that, while the *science* of healing has been making tremendous strides of late, the *business* of healing has been lagging woefully behind. I have two major criticisms. In the first place, I do not believe that doctors, generally, are receiving anything like sufficient pay for their services. In the second place, I think the public, as a rule, is paying altogether too much for the services which it gets. Readers who have not studied business organization may think that these criticisms are mutually exclusive. But those who have studied our business system will recognize that these two ailments very commonly go together. The high-price industries, as a rule, are the unprofitable industries. It is in industries like the manufacture of motor cars, in which first attention is paid to bringing down the price, that the greatest profits are realized.

I am not going to propose, however, that doctors undertake to speed up their operations. I shall not suggest that patients be conveyed to them on a moving belt, while each surgeon makes a particular thrust with the particular instrument which he is trained to handle best. I do claim that the fundamental truths of business may be applied to every business, including the business of healing.

I do not criticise the medical profession for not understanding the principles of modern business. Our modern business leaders themselves do not understand them yet. But they must work according to those principles, for the simple reason that those who do not do so must soon cease to be our leaders. I do not claim to understand all the principles of business: anyone who would dare make such a claim would not be worth a hearing. It is only the

fundamentalists in business, like the fundamentalists in theology, who know everything; and most of what they know is demonstrably not so. We are in the middle of the greatest social revolution in history. A whole new world is coming into existence; and anyone who already knows all there is to know about that world and its relationships, is either God, or else he thinks he is. Readers must use their own judgment as to how to classify him.

The most we can hope for, in the present business and social revolution, is to attain a scientific attitude towards its events. That is the attitude of a learner; the attitude of our leading medical men toward the events of medical science.

WHILE I am not censuring the medical profession, then, I wish to call their attention to a few of the discoveries which the students of business have made, and see if they may not be applied to the business of medicine. These discoveries may not advance the science of healing much; but they should advance the business of healing; and that, after all, is what most of us are interested in. It is not enough for the average sufferer from disease today to know that his disease is curable. What he wants to know is that there is a practical chance of his being cured. Information that there is some wonderful healer over in Europe, who could cure him, would not help the average American workingman. He cannot hire that particular healer to come over here. His only chance of being helped by what that healer knows is through that healer's knowledge being brought to him through the organization of the healing business. In the last analysis, this is a problem of distribution.

A generation or two ago, we could not see this business of the distribution of knowledge, as plainly as we may see it today. For we supposed, in those days, and it was quite natural that we should suppose, that it was possible for men to master the profession and to learn about all that the whole profession knew. We know now that that cannot be done. We may honor the old general practitioner. He was

a hero in the battle for the common good. Nevertheless, he was, and had to be, very much of a free lance; and the most that he could do for a patient generally, was to give that patient the benefit of what he had learned in college and later in the school of his own practical experience.

We cannot depend upon general practitioners now because it is impossible that anyone should practice all the knowledge which the medical profession throughout the world has brought to light: The function of the

The New Order in Medicine

THE profession of medicine now faces a great new responsibility forced upon it by the rapid evolution of a new economic order. The tradition of the man of medicine has been to make his discoveries available to science and to every doctor. Now he faces the necessity of working out a program which will make his discoveries actually available to all. We have the facts, we have the trained physicians and nurses, but we have not as yet been able to meet the ideal of seeing that each member of civilized society obtains that advantage which is possible to him if he can get his share from the great pool of scientific medicine. To make medicine fit in with the other social forces so that its distribution will be uniform, is vital in this age of science and democracy. —Ray Lyman Wilbur, M.D., in an address at the University of Virginia, October 22, 1929.

practitioner today must be less and less a matter of applying his own superior wisdom to the needs of the patient, and more and more a matter of placing at the service of the patient the knowledge and skill of the whole medical profession.

One does not have to know anything about medicine to know this. The principle applies to all scientific professions. The same principle applies to education in general. It was not so long ago that boys went to college with the idea of becoming well-read. But no one could possibly become well-read today. There are more good books published in a single season than any grind could master in a lifetime. There isn't a brain in existence which could keep up with 10,000 printing-presses.

There was a time, in very early history, when one could become well-read. The gist of what the world knew might be pretty well covered in a set of books which a sufficiently curious and industrious mind might, within a lifetime, read and understand. But no one could possibly get even the gist of the knowledge which science is digging up in our time. The educated man today, then, cannot hope to be well-read. The educated mind today is the mind which best learns how to *use* the knowledge in existence, particularly those truths which may apply to the thing which he is doing.

The business of healing is hampered, it seems to me, by failure to organize on these incontrovertible truths. It is hampered by the old traditions; particularly by the tradition that a man, by passing certain university examinations, may be equipped to practice medicine.

No layman needs to apologize for declaring that the average doctor in America today does not know how to practice medicine. For the doctors themselves are constantly saying this, more emphatically than they possibly could say it by calling each other frauds. It is a common, everyday experience for the sick to shop around for a cure; and to be told by each successive diagnostician that all other diagnoses were utterly wrong. One doctor may find a heart murmur and treat the patient for that. The next may declare that

the trouble is malnutrition; the next that his kidneys are not functioning as they should; the next that he is simply nervous and worried; and the next that the case is obviously one of some glandular deficiency. There may be some truth in what they all say; but this truth is not organized so that the patient can employ it.

Now, this is not good business for the doctors. And it is very bad business for the patients. Such shopping costs money. A woman may waste a lot of time in our store, looking for something she cannot find. But we do not charge her for looking, and doctors necessarily do. The cost of sickness is one of the most tragic taxes on human life today; and the cost is made additionally burdensome by this practice of shopping around among the healers instead of being able to connect at once with the combined resources of the healing profession.

EVERYBODY knows, in his personal experience, of tragedies due to preventable and curable ills, of lives which have been wrecked which could have been saved if the patient had been able to consult an organized medical profession instead of having to shop around without guidance among innumerable doctors. I have known promising and ambitious employes to become unfitted for the work of life, because of protracted sickness in their homes. In the reports of many of our credit unions, it has come out that by far the greatest call for small loans—a demand aggregating a third of all the demands made—has been to cover the emergencies caused by sickness and by doctors' bills. When we remember that credit union work has only begun in America (although it has 25,000 stockholders and assets of \$40,000,000), and that the masses of our people in such emergencies are still likely to fall into the hands of loan sharks, we may appreciate what this burden means.

To the credit of the medical profession, be it said that it has worked hard, early and late, to spread the principles of hygiene. The medical profession has shown real nobility in this. It has not wished to profit out of sickness. It has preferred to teach people how to keep well. Unfortunately, that is not enough. It is good as far as it goes, just as the propaganda of the business interests has been good when they have united to spread the gospel of thrift. But there is something lacking in both cases. Neither personal health nor personal saving is a strictly personal matter. People do not and cannot learn to save adequately individually; for saving, as we have recently come to learn, requires harmonious mass action, and there is a vast difference between this mass action and action by each separate individual in the mass.

Mass production does not mean that everybody shall be over-worked; and the maximum service on the part of the medical profession does not mean merely that every doctor shall work as hard as he can. In both cases it means that work shall be co-ordinated, and that this co-ordination shall be effected on the principle of maximum service at a minimum cost to the consumer.

It would not cure our economic ills if everybody should suddenly become very thrifty and very sensible in the handling of his personal finances. Everybody might become as shrewd as David Harum, but everybody could not thus get ahead of everybody else. The masses can advance only as mass action is organized along strictly scientific lines to bring to everybody the greatest possible service at the lowest possible cost.

Now I believe, and I should like to be corrected if I am

Teeter-totter in Middletown

IT begins to be apparent that the profession of medicine, like the occupation of running a drill press or selling real estate in Middletown, swings around the making of money as one of its chief concerns. As a group, Middletown physicians are devoting their energies to building up and maintaining a practice in a highly competitive field. Competition is so keen that even the best doctors in many cases supplement their incomes by putting up their own prescriptions. Meanwhile, one observes the situation of some fifty local doctors spending much time sitting in their offices waiting for patients to come in and proffer the requisite money for treatment, "needing," as one of the ablest of them expressed it in a professional memorandum to a group of associates, "a chance to grow in practice as well as professional attainments," while at the same time 38,000 people, most of whom have some physical defect great or small needing correction, are in only relatively few cases having these defects treated by the best medical skill the city possesses. . . . Neither the physicians nor the people are satisfied with this situation in which medical skill is engaged part of its time in a game of teeter-totter with the city, the institutional devices of "price," "competition," and "professional ethics" being the fence over which the two groups saw up and down.—*Middletown*, by Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd (Harcourt, Brace and Company).

at fault, that ten regular physicians in a modern American community, are likely to know more than one. And if healing is a science, instead of an art (using the word "art" as we employ it in the case of a painter or a sculptor), I believe that ten physicians, combining their resources and their knowledge, could be of far more use to the average patient, than the ten guessing at him individually could possibly be. I do not believe that ten artists can paint a better picture than the best of them could paint alone. Their combined efforts, I fancy, might be even worse than the worst of them would individually produce: and if healing a body is analogous to painting a picture, then none of my suggestions can be considered apropos. But this, I understand, is not the theory of the medical profession. Their theory is, I believe, that healing is a science; and that the advantage of consulting a regular physician instead of resorting to an inspired healer lies in this fact.

Medical traditions, however, seem to a business man to be somewhat out of harmony with this scientific concept. It seems that the profession is not always able to forget that the doctor was once a Medicine Man—a sort of priest who got his knowledge from supernatural sources—and that his holy dictum on the sacred matter of fooling the evil spirits of disease is not to be questioned by any mere customer. The customers might conceivably feel that way about their doctors still, if the doctors themselves were not destroying their faith. The case of the doctors is something like that of the Supreme Court. We laymen were always ready to listen with awe to any mistaken opinion which that court might utter, if a minority of the court itself had not almost uniformly risen to explain to us how mistaken this majority's opinion was.

THE highest courts, we have learned, may be wrong, even if their decision be unanimous. And the decision of a group of doctors, merged in one clinic, may be wrong. Nevertheless, an organized health center should be able to give a patient far better service than any individual practitioner would be likely to give him; and even if the service were no better, this organized service would cost the patient much less time and money than he would be bound to spend in purchasing a dozen doses of advice piecemeal.

It may be said that medicine is so organized. Do we not have our hospitals and sanatoriums, as well as organized

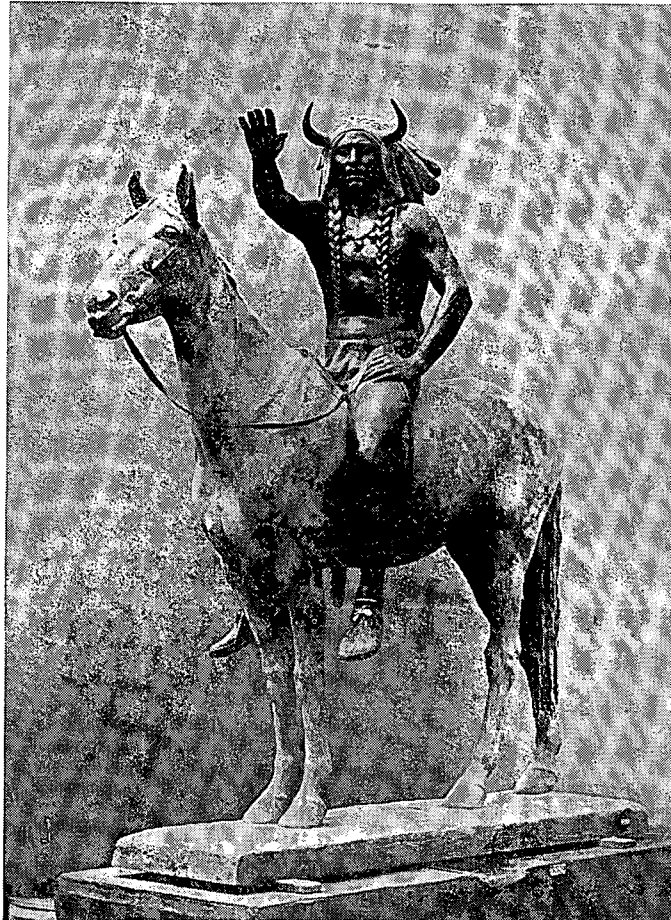
private clinics in all of our large cities? Yes, we do; and in many of these hospitals, those who have no money may be treated free; which means, of course, that those who are not treated free must pay more for their services than those services are supposed to be worth. Now, this is a good charitable principle, and I see no way of abolishing such charity just now. But it is not a good business principle. It will be well to keep that in mind.

It is not a good business principle for two specific reasons. Unless there is one price to all, a business cannot organize for maximum service. It cannot do so, because it cannot measure its service, and will be constantly tempted, while being good and generous to this and that needy customer, to keep its eye out constantly for every chance to gouge. I, personally, am not particularly injured by the large fees which the medical profession charges those who it considers can afford to pay. But the *medical business is injured* through having to make such distinctions. It is kept from gauging its services scientifically. The healing business, in other words, is defrauded of any workable economic check upon its activities.

The burden of this system bears heaviest upon neither the wealthy nor the very poor, but upon the average person. It discourages the average person from trying to secure the best of medical

attention: and no business which is organized in such a way as to discourage the masses from becoming customers, is on a solid economic basis, no matter how excellent its scientific attainment may be.

There is another way in which the student of business must criticize the organization of most of the hospitals and health centers today. They do not make a profit. No business which is any good can be organized merely for profit—business must be organized for service—nevertheless, if a business does not make a profit, it has no way of measuring its services. Business should make a profit. The healing business should be profitable. We should find a way, if possible, even to make our hospitals profitable. I think we shall find such a way in the end, but the medical profession alone cannot find it. It will require the co-ordination of all business—the general adoption of mass production methods combined with the reduction of unemployment to a minimum, and the raising of wages to such a standard that practically everybody shall be able to pay for all the services which he needs. But that (*Continued on page 448*).



THE MEDICINE MAN, by Cyrus E. Dallin

Most convincing of all tribal wise men is the Indian, whom Mr. Dallin knows from long-ago boyhood days in Utah. This famous statue is in Fairmount Park, Philadelphia



The Dying Patient or Doctor's Last Fee
Color print by Rowlandson



Simplified Procedure. Water color by Rowlandson



Vignette by Daumier
From Némésis Médicale

Old Jibes at Doctor's Fees

From a compilation by Dr. Eugen Holländer, *Die Karikatur und Satire in der Medizin.* Verlag Ferdinand Enke, Stuttgart