

At Random

THE COMMON TASK

WHAT can we regard as the Common Task of the Medical Services of the Army, or, for that matter, of the Medical Services of all our armed forces?

The answer is given quite simply in F.S.R. and in the training manuals, and from these would seem quite easy to follow and carry out, at any rate, in broad principles and even, possibly, in detail.

But the whole idea and application were for many years somewhat contrary to the general trend of medical teaching, which concentrated on the disease and its cure, and therefore to the preconceived ideas of the general public and, in particular, of the newly recruited medical officer on what is the Common Task of the Medical Services.

The whole trend of medical teaching and, in fact, the natural inclination of the young enthusiastic medical man used to be concentrated on the sick or injured individual, the cure of the diseased condition or the healing of the injury; and, incidentally, the monetary rewards of medicine were mainly given for the healing and mending of the sick and injured.

Until recently this was quite definitely the attitude of general civil medical practice to the public and of the general public to the common task of the medical profession. It was much more spectacular and remunerative from the professional point of view, and an apparently much more natural demand from the general public point of view to cure the sick or badly injured individual than to claim that several individuals had been kept in good health by preventive measures carried out by or even merely advised by the doctor.

It is interesting to note how this attitude of both the Public and the Profession are being affected by the present provisions and restrictive practices of the National Health Service. It was in recent years only that this attitude in civil medical practice and the Public's ideas on the functions of the Medical Profession had begun to change, the change being exemplified by the later developments of the original Panel system, the School medical services, natal and pre-natal medical care, dental care of children and young adults and above all the extension and control exercised by the Public Health Services in the prevention of infectious diseases, of food-borne infections and of epidemic importations. But the present regulations and, to many members of the Profession, the restrictive practices of the N.H.S. as they now stand are definitely carrying this change of attitude further; the old relationship between the doctor and the patient is

being lost, it is a very moot point whether this nationalized method of medicine is really offering a better way of life or leading to the development of real preventive medicine.

It was the Army Medical Service which was the pioneer of *preventive* medicine, which found its main common task to be the preservation of health and the production of a fit force kept fit for fighting; the care of the sick and wounded being a subsidiary task with its main object that of the return of those sick and wounded back to duty as soon as possible. This latter may seem a somewhat callous view to the ordinary layman or to the supersympathetic non-combatant, but an army is meant to fight, not to go to hospital. The test of the efficiency of its Medical Services should be a high percentage of fitness and low sick rates, small sick parades and empty hospitals.

A glance through the past pages and volumes of this Journal over the past few years or even since its foundation will show the interested reader the variety of subjects which go to cover this common task, the Preservation of Health. The Specialist in any given subject naturally tends to concentrate his written output on his specialism and to elaborate the curative as well as, or perhaps even more than the preventive aspect of his subject; but, on the whole, the trend of articles supplied to the Journal, and therefore, presumably, the trend of thought of its contributors is towards that preventive aspects of medicine, the preservation of fitness, the promotion of positive health.

We think, too, that the general trend of opinion amongst the laity of the services as to the functions of its medical branch have distinctly changed over the past thirty years and that the combatant officer, particularly the senior combatant officer, now realizes that preventive medicine is the main task of the medical side and that that task consequently embraces opinion, advice or action on practically every phase of military training and performance; on housing, feeding, clothing; on selecting, teaching and co-ordinating the available material. Definitely gone, we hope, are the days when the following was heard: Orderly Officer reporting to Unit Commander: "The Senior Medical Officer has arrived to see the camp and lines." Who replies: "Oh has he, well the latrines are over there."

This trend of opinion appears also to have spread to certain sections of the civilian laity in its conception of the duties and purpose of the medical profession. The very efficient work of the Medical Officers of Health over many, many years has undoubtedly had its influence both in the practical prevention of disease and in the education of certain sections of the public. In this connexion the following quotation from a recent leading article in the *British Medical Journal* on this very subject is of interest.¹ This comments on the importance of the preventive side of medicine and its achievements but also on the difficulty of impressing on the lay public that prevention is the primary common task of its medical profession.

¹ Extract from *B.M.J.*, June 9, 1951, p. 1309.

PREVENTIVE MEDICINE IN MEDICAL PRACTICE

The saying about the Greeks and their gifts might be expressed in modern terms, "I begin to suspect you when you pat me on the back." In the medical profession the most back-patted groups are general practitioners and medical officers of health. Family doctors are, as we all know, "the first line of defence against disease" and "the backbone of the profession"; and the health officers have a special place in the hearts of ministers of health. The famous White Paper of 1944 said as much, and Mr. Bevan went even further: "I am confident," said he, "that the medical officers of health are not at the end of an epoch but at the beginning; that they are not at the beginning of an epoch of declining usefulness but, on the contrary, I believe that their value is going to expand, and their importance is going to grow, and that they are going to achieve new distinction." We need not doubt the sincerity of those who make remarks of that kind; it is their understanding that is at fault. Anyone can talk about prevention, and the word "health" is too often profaned; but the art and practice of health are difficult. Moreover, it is always easy to make light of preventive medicine as carried out by the general practitioner and the medical officer of health. Their work can be cast aside as unscientific, if only because its results are hard to assess in a limited sphere or over a short period of time. The event that does not happen is not published. The effect of prevention can be, as it were, distributed like a bonus among shareholders. But who is so bold as to say, "I prevented"?

The practice of preventive medicine is steadily having its educative effect, we hope; but it will be a long, long time before the general lay public, the townsman and more particularly the villager of this country comes to regard the common task of the medical profession as being that of prevention rather than cure. It will be a long time before the British housewife will ask for or possibly even receive with equanimity a visit from her N.H.S. professional attendant for the purpose of inspecting her kitchen, larder and lavatory in order to preserve the health of her family. She will much more naturally call him in to deal with the established onset of summer diarrhoea or even a possible typhoid infection and will probably be horrified and indignant on being told that she could have prevented this by proper attention to her kitchen, larder and lavatory.

In the armed forces the preventive side of medicine is, we think, firmly established and now accepted as a normal procedure and for the Medical Services their common task.