

## Open Mail

*To the Editor of The Public Health Journal, State Medicine and Sanitary Review:*

### Should Doctors Dispense?

Sir:—Should doctors dispense? Have they not enough to do, in examining patients, finding out what is the matter with them, telling them what to do, and writing a prescription, without the additional work of measuring out drugs, putting them into a bottle, filling up with water, writing the label, and sticking it on? The answer, surely, is "Yes."

Dispensing is not, strictly speaking, doctor's work at all. It is work which should be done by a druggist, who has been specially trained for it. In Scotland dispensing is almost invariably done by druggists; and this is also the custom in certain favoured towns in England. Unfortunately, however, in most parts of this country and the United States people have got into the way of expecting a bottle of medicine from the man who looks at their tongues and feels their pulses; and they would feel that they had not received their money's worth if he gave them no more than some advice and a written prescription. This is a pity, for it has brought about certain evils. It has caused people to regard the bottle of medicine as the most important thing they get from the doctor; and it has caused the druggists to go in for prescribing on their own account. Both these things are bad for the patient.

As a rule the last thing a patient needs is medicine. Very often he is living in unhealthy conditions, or eating and drinking in the wrong way, or doing work for which he is not fitted. What he needs is advice as regards his method of living—not drugs. If he is really ill—and most people who consult a doctor are out of sorts rather than really ill—he usually needs rest in bed, freedom from anxiety, proper food, and plenty of fresh air. Only when these things have been provided does the question of medicine come in. Yet, under present conditions, what the patient gets, more often than not, is very scrappy

advice, and a bottle of medicine, with, perhaps, a box of pills thrown in. In most cases he takes the medicine, in which he has faith, and ignores the advice, which he regards as of no value.

The bottle of medicine, supplied by the doctor, probably is responsible for more inefficient doctor-work than anything else at all; and there is more inefficient doctor-work than most of us imagine. If only people could be got to see it, a thorough examination, an accurate diagnosis, and sound advice are things worth paying for, without any bottle of medicine; and if they would pay the doctor for these things, and get the medicine from the druggist, they would be much better served.

Doctors often may be heard to complain of the "prescribing druggist." They say that druggists should not be allowed to do work which properly belongs to the doctors. They forget that the doctors are doing work which properly belongs to the druggists. What the druggists say is, "As long as you doctors dispense, we shall prescribe"; and they do, to an enormous extent.

Now, while it must be obvious to everyone who thinks about it for a minute that the prescribing druggist is something of a danger to the community, it must not be forgotten that there is a great deal of justice in what the druggist says. He has passed difficult examinations, and he has spent a good deal of money in qualifying himself for his business. It is hard that he should find his legitimate work taken from him by the doctors. He may make money by selling soap, and tooth-brushes, and patent medicines, and so on; but it was not for this that he worked hard and faced the examiners. He studied the properties of drugs, and the mysteries of their compounding, in order that he might be fitted to dispense doctors' prescriptions with knowledge, and so with safety. Finding this work taken from him, it is not surprising that he retaliates by listening to the tales of woe brought