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PROPOSED LEGISLATION RELATING TO THE
MEDICAL PORTION OF THE PENSION
BUREAU.

BY



HENRY BIXBY HEMENWAY, M.D.,
OF KALAMAZOO, MICH.



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**PROPOSED LEGISLATION RELATING TO THE
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It is not a matter of indifference to the general profession how any portion thereof is regarded and treated. The disgrace of a single man is a disgrace upon the fraternity. A physician doing public service is almost without exception ill paid. How many health officers receive compensation proportionate to the work done? No one would think of letting the position of city or county attorney to the lowest bidder, and yet in a wealthy and intelligent community, at no distant period in the past, the position of county physician was given to the lowest bidder, after advertising for proposals. While attorneys may regulate admission to the bar, a like privilege is not granted to physicians. Because many knaves with little education secure large patronage, the people depreciate the medical service. Two boys set out, the one to study medicine and the other law. The lawyer is admitted to the bar at the end of two years, after having been able to pay



his expenses by legal writing while studying. The doctor must be at constant expense for three full years before he is entitled to earn anything by his profession. Each is then called upon for a like amount of public service. The lawyer's bill is promptly audited, while the authorities hesitate to allow one-fourth as much to the doctor. Such conduct toward our profession is belittling and degrading. It is therefore time that the whole profession should be aroused to act in harmony.

The attention of the profession at large has occasionally been directed to pension legislation. Dr. P. S. Connor, of Cincinnati, read a paper before the American Academy of Medicine, at Pittsburg, 1886, in which he urged the appointment of forty boards of examining surgeons, each consisting of two members, who should devote their entire time to that service. His paper was published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (vol. vii. p. 570). Dr. L. Brown, of Pottsville, Iowa, in the same journal for January 1, 1887, criticised this paper at length, but he omitted to say that such a special service would not attract men of large experience, and lacking that, the examiners would be dogmatic and theoretical rather than practical. I might give illustrations of this, drawn from the work done in the Washington office, had I the space.

On the other hand, it is not desirable that boards be too greatly multiplied; first, because from lack of available material from which to construct boards, the quality of the work done must deteriorate; and,

secondly, if the work is so decreased as to diminish materially the pay of members, the position cannot command the best talent.

In this same journal for Oct. 27, 1888, is an article by Dr. John W. Wright, of Columbus, read before the Section on Ophthalmology at the meeting of the Association in 1888, on "A Plea for the Better Recognition of the Oculist in the Service of the U. S. Pension Department." A like plea might be made for all specialists treating diseases of men. It simply shows how preposterous it is to attempt to establish a board at every country cross-roads.

Pension applicants are examined only when ordered by the bureau, or by a "special examiner." (The "special examiner's" work is purely legal, and cases are put into his hands in which the evidence is conflicting or doubtful.) Examination orders are issued in duplicate, one going to the applicant and the other to the particular board or single surgeon before whom the case is ordered. An order is to be obeyed by the applicant and honored by the surgeon within three months from date of issue. At the end of that time, orders remaining in the hands of the surgeon are returned with the endorsement, "failed to appear." The order to the surgeon gives the statement of claims. When it is impossible for the examination to be made by a "board," the Commissioner orders a single surgeon to visit the applicant and make the examination.

The boards, or single surgeons, do not grant the pension, or pass upon the legality of the claim. Evidence as to the degree of disability, or to the

cause thereof, have no value for the board. That should be sent to the bureau. The work of the examining board consists of making a record of the present physical condition of the applicant, with an estimate of the degree of disability from each cause, including senility. Formerly the examination was only with reference to the special claims. Under the late medical referee, as well as the present, all disabilities have been examined, whether originating in the service or not. The record made is called the "certificate of examination."

In the Washington office the force consists of one medical referee, one assistant, two surgeons, and eighteen medical examiners. These men receive each per annum, respectively, \$3000, \$2500, \$2000, and \$1800. The completed certificate is first examined by one of the eighteen medical examiners, later by a surgeon and the medical referee or his assistant. In passing upon the case, the examiners have before them all the papers in the case, often including several certificates of examination. Can it be expected that a dozen and a half medical examiners should carefully judge all the certificates for the country? Is it strange that when the magnificent salary of \$1800 is paid each examiner, incompetent assistance should be secured. Dr. Wright's remark really applies more forcibly to the Washington office than elsewhere.

A certificate of examination must be in the handwriting of a member of the board. It gives the name, rank, service, and post-office of applicant, number of his claim, date of examination, and post-

office of board, disabilities for which pension is claimed, pulse rate, respiration, temperature, height, weight and age of applicant, and applicant's statement. These are followed by results of examination, and ratings of each disability. If the claim is on diarrhœa, for example, the certificate must show the condition of tongue, teeth, gums, skin, liver, spleen, stomach and intestines, and heart. "The rectum must be explored digitally or with speculum," and any fissure, fistula, hæmorrhoid, or prolapse must be carefully described. As to heart, it is required to give location of apex beat, area of dulness and position, character of impulse, character of sounds, exact location of bruit as to time and valve, dilatation or hypertrophy, dyspnœa, œdema, or cyanosis. If disease of kidneys is affirmed (which generally means simply lumbago), the condition of all vital organs must be stated, with chemical and microscopical examination of urine and opthalmoscopic examination of the eye. Gunshot and other injuries, neuralgic tracts, etc., must be shown by a diagram. Every certificate must be signed by each member upon its face and back, and it must be copied verbatim into the record book, and the copy also signed by each member.

It will therefore be seen that the work is not small—is, in fact, many times greater than that required by any life insurance company. It is not allowable for one member of a board to make the examination. All must participate. Boards vary greatly as to capacity for work. One may examine thoroughly twenty men, while another is going

through five cases. This capacity for work depends upon system and concentration. Since it takes more time to write the certificate than to make the examination, much depends upon the speed of the writer. It is not allowable to have a clerk. Twenty examinations is a legal day's work, and as a rule it is a full day's work. A good certificate must be short, concise, clear, and complete.

Aside from any writing that may be done at the meeting of the board, it is expected that the secretary shall transcribe the certificate into the record book, back the certificates (for filing), make out the daily and quarterly reports, and attend to the correspondence of the board. For each day's work there must be made out one daily, and two quarterly reports. These reports give, for each applicant, date of examination, name of applicant, character of claim, number, and services, and the fee of each examiner. The names must be arranged in two alphabetical series. For a day's work of twenty examinations made by the Kalamazoo board, the word "Kalamazoo" must be written sixty times on the certificates and fifteen times on reports; total, seventy-five times. It may occur more times. The date must be written 102 times for the same work, and each member must sign his name forty-three times. No stamping is allowed.

Surgeons are supplied with the blank forms of the office, and envelopes addressed to the Commissioner. They must supply other stationery, pay postage on all correspondence, except with the Commissioner, and furnish an office with the necessary instruments

for making the examinations in accordance with modern science.

Prior to the act of March 3, 1885, surgeons received two dollars for each examination. That act reduced the compensation so that now surgeons receive two dollars each for each examination up to five, and one dollar each on further examinations up to twenty, examined on the same day. There is no legal compensation for the extra labor devolving upon the secretary of the board. Many boards, however, agree upon certain concessions. Some pay the secretary five or ten dollars per quarter; others ten per cent. of the receipts of the board; others still, ten to twenty-five cents per examination.

The present small compensation is made still smaller by delay in auditing and paying accounts. On October 23, 1889, the accounts for the board of which the writer is a member had not been audited for the quarter ending June 30th.

A meeting of examining surgeons was held in the Pension Building during the International Medical Congress, September, 1887. After a general discussion, it was resolved unanimously that the present compensation is far too small, and Congress was asked to restore the former fee. At the request of Dr. Campbell, medical referee, I drafted two bills, which were introduced before the lower House by the Hon. J. C. Burrows. The first of these relates to the medical staff in the Washington office, and reads as follows:

A BILL

To increase the efficiency of the Medical Division of the Pension Bureau.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the medical staff of the Pension Office shall consist of one medical referee, one assistant medical referee, three surgeons, and twenty-four medical examiners.

SEC. 2. That the medical referee shall be a man of preëminent professional ability, and shall receive the sum of four thousand dollars annually. He shall be the chief of the Medical Division, and as such shall oversee and arrange the work of said division.

SEC. 3. That the assistant medical referee shall also be of preëminent professional ability, and shall receive an annual salary of three thousand and six hundred dollars,

SEC. 4. That the three surgeons shall be experts in their profession, and shall each receive an annual salary of three thousand dollars.

SEC. 5. That the medical examiners shall be surgeons of education, skill and experience, and shall receive each an annual salary of two thousand and five hundred dollars.

SEC. 6. That all former acts or portions of acts conflicting with the provisions of this act are hereby repealed.

SEC. 7. This act shall take immediate effect.

It adds one surgeon and six examiners to the present force, and increases their salaries as follows :

Medical Referee, from \$3000 to \$4000. Assistant Referee, from \$2500 to \$3600. Surgeons, from

\$2000 to \$3000. Medical Examiners, from \$1800 to \$2500.

As originally drafted, at Mr. Burrows' suggestion the salary of medical referee was \$5000 and his assistant \$4000, but Dr. Cambell asked that they be cut down as above to assist in the passage of the bill.

The second bill relates to boards of examining surgeons, and reads :

A BILL

To increase the efficiency of Boards of Surgeons for the examination of pension applicants.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That each member of each board of surgeons for the examining of applicants for pensions, shall, as now authorized by law, receive the sum of two dollars for the examination of each applicant.

SEC. 2. That the secretary of each board of surgeons shall receive a further compensation of fifteen cents for each examination.

SEC. 3. That the secretary of each board of surgeons shall be, and hereby is, empowered to employ a clerk, and for the official conduct and pay of such clerk the said secretary shall be responsible.

SEC. 4. That all former acts, or portions of acts, in conflict with the provisions of this act, are hereby repealed.

SEC. 5. This act shall take immediate effect.

Dr. Campbell thought that section 2 ought to say twenty, in the place of fifteen cents. So far as examining boards have been heard from, all agree

that it should say twenty-five cents, and when the bill is again introduced, this change will be made. It must be noticed that section 3 does not add any expense, but makes legal the employment of a clerk by the secretary.

Mr. Burrows has introduced these bills before the present session of Congress, and Mr. Stockbridge will present them in the Senate. It is therefore hoped that *every* physician, whether in the government service or not, will, *without delay*, write to his Representative and Senator in support of these bills. It is not claimed that the pay here proposed is such as it should be, but it is better than at present. If all will give their aid, the changes may be accomplished. If the present low rate of compensation is continued, the service must deteriorate. Imperfect work necessitates more frequent re-examinations, and justice to the pensioner is impossible.

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