The Political Responsibility of the Physician

On various occasions heretofore the JOURNAL has endeavored to impress upon the members of the medical profession the utility and need of their taking a more active part in the government of this country, both as regards National and municipal affairs. The subject is one, however, that is not exhaustible by one or a few editorial utterances, and it is one that in some one of its many aspects is always demanding consideration. While the secular and religious papers are continually demanding the co-operation of good citizens in political affairs to prevent their being controlled, as is too often the case, by the bad citizens, it is certainly not out of place for medical journals to call the attention of its readers from time to time to their responsibilities in this matter....

The duty of our profession to itself has been already editorially pointed out in this journal, and is only reiterated here to keep up the interest in the reform that is needed. It has also been pointed out that we owe a duty to our fellows and that of all men the physician is his brother's keeper, and his responsibility as a citizen and voter is correspondingly heightened. As individuals we feel this responsibility, but as a collective body we are apt to be remiss and forgetful in this regard, and evils that we could prevent are allowed full play. The interest of a physician in good government is something more than that of merely a good citizen; he is himself a guardian of the public in their nearest and dearest relations, and as such he has it as his duty to do all in his power to protect his charge from all evil legislation or vicious maladministration of salutary laws. In the matter of direct sanitation alone, the value of medical knowledge in the forming and execution of the laws and municipal regulations, ought to be sufficiently evident to require no demonstration.

A writer in a recent issue of a religious journal calls attention to the fact that the gradual reduction of the rate of mortality in New York City from 25.18 to 20 in the last three years saved 3,758 lives in 1895, 7,736 in 1896 and 9,920 in 1897, a total of 21,414 lives, due to better government and closer attention to sanitation. If such a saving of human life can occur in one case it can in others, and if it is to be brought about elsewhere, or generally, it will have to be through the co-operation of enlightened medical opinion...and the community as a whole can act intelligently only under medical supervision and advice.

A sanitary issue is almost, if not altogether, an unknown thing in our politics, and when it occurs it is handled, as a rule, along party lines and with all the disadvantages that such a course involves. Our legislatures are made up of lawyers and professional politicians without other visible means of support, together with a sprinkling of farmers and others who, though well meaning and generally honest, are apt to be prejudiced and misled...If there are any physicians they are few in number and, as a rule, have not the influence that they should exert, even in matters that fall directly within their professional sphere, and in regard to which they should have a predominant voice.

In Congress, as regards this special point of view, matters are no better; there has been, since Rush's time, no really eminent medical man amongst our National legislators—we have no Virchow or Verga in our Senate or House of Representatives. In the French Chamber of Deputies, there have generally been a number of physicians, and while the leading parts that some of them have taken may not have always reflected the most credit upon them, in medical questions they have often combined, and we do not hear of their inactivity when unintelligent legislation on medical and sanitary matters is proposed. The debates on medical matters in the British Parliament are of enough interest to be reported in British medical journals, and legislation in these matters is not left uninfluenced by professional action and information.

There is no reason why these conditions should not be attained in this country nor why, in our State legislatures especially, there should not be a working representation of the medical profession, who in all matters involving their special professional knowledge and the public health, should act together for the best interests of the community without regard to party lines....

It is true that not every physician is fit to be a legislator and there are few probably that can afford it, and it is also true that some medical politicians have not been creditable representatives of their honorable profession. This, however, does not alter the facts we have stated, and further it does not at all affect the general question of the propriety of medical men recognizing their individual and collective responsibility as citizens, enlarged as it is by their special qualifications to judge and act in so many important matters affecting the public welfare.