

EDITORIAL

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THE UNJUSTIFIABLE ARMY SYSTEM OF DISPENSING.

THE conditions surrounding the deaths of William Cornett and Frank Canki are such as to demand a searching, competent and impartial investigation. William Cornett and Frank Canki were children of enlisted men serving in the United States Army at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.¹ In April the children became ill of measles and were treated by army physicians. A prescription was written for atropine sulphate. The prescription was dispensed by an army employee in an army dispensary. The prescription was improperly filled. In an hour both children were dead.

The tragic circumstances aroused an intense interest throughout Kansas. The newspapers gave much space to the case. The public became indignant and severely critical of those in authority. It became known that there was a vast difference between the Kansas and army systems. In Kansas, a person must satisfy stringent state requirements before he is permitted to practice pharmacy in the compounding of physicians' prescriptions and in the dispensing of drugs and poisons. It became known that the army does not consider such requirements necessary for persons who deal with deadly poisons. The public learned that frequently the practice of pharmacy in the army is officially entrusted to persons not having the necessary competency and skill. The public sensed the fundamental idea that the official system was itself responsible for the double tragedy.

In due course Corporal Ralph E. Hawkins, who had dispensed the prescription, was tried by court-martial and acquitted. Military autocracy had at least gone through the form! The system had spoken for the system and given it a clean bill! This military fiat should not stand in the way of a full and complete investigation. It is a fact that the hospital corps at Fort Leavenworth did not include a registered or graduate pharmacist. It is quite obvious that Corporal Hawkins was not a competent person to assume the responsibility of prescription pharmacist. He had had no training and no experience such as would qualify him for the exacting task of dispensing a deadly poison to sick children. Corporal Hawkins appears to have been no more than a helper who had done odd jobs around the dispensary. He was a part of an arbitrary military system which ran true to form! The whole case demands an investigation by competent and fair-minded people who are concerned only with the facts. The court martial represented the authority which created the system under which Hawkins was controlled. There should be an investigation by persons not interested in the verdict.

The Journal-World, Lawrence, Kansas, in speaking through its editorial columns says, "The children's deaths were traceable directly to the lack of graduate pharmacists in the army medical organization. A member of the medical department made an error in compounding a prescription, which a graduate pharmacist would not have made, with fatal results in two families. A court martial

¹ See pages following "Committee Reports" this issue of the JOURNAL.

has established that as the salient fact in the case. . . . The prescription was properly written but wrongly filled." *The Kansas City Star* says Hawkins "is not a registered pharmacist" and refers to the mistake in compounding the prescription as a "tragic error." *The El Dorado Times* says, "And so we have what appears to be, on the face of it, a glaring defect in the handling of medicines in the United States Army Medical Service. . . . This incident happened in peace times. It is rather disagreeable to think of the mistakes that may have happened from the same cause during wartime, when haste in dispensing medicine was necessary. . . . Surely the lives of soldiers and of their dependents are entitled to be safeguarded against ignorance and inexperience. The army certainly needs the services of pharmacists who know their business as well as citizens in more peaceful occupation." Upon his acquittal by the court martial, Hawkins was, according to reports by the Associated Press, returned to prescription work in the hospital!

It is true that the practice of pharmacy, including the compounding of physicians' prescriptions and the dispensing of poisons and potent drugs is such an exacting profession that errors do occur at the hands of the trained and qualified. Such errors are, however, of such rare occurrence as to be news items of the first importance. In this phase of the subject, perhaps, lies the most convincing reason for employing the most competent and skilful. If dangerous or tragic consequences are occasionally met with in civil life, where every possible legal safeguard is placed around the practice of pharmacy, how much more likely are they in the army where these safeguards are for the most part ignored!

The facts which have become public are sufficient to arouse the country to the conditions which surround the practice of pharmacy in the United States Army. The facts fully support the contention of the AMERICAN PHARMACEUTICAL ASSOCIATION and the entire drug industry that there should be established a Pharmaceutical Corps in the army to take over and administer this important and responsible professional service. Public opinion should demand that the conditions surrounding the practice of pharmacy in the United States Army cease to be a danger to those in the service and their dependents.—ROBERT L. SWAIN, *Chairman of Committee on Pharmacy Corps in U. S. Army.*

THE APPLICATION OF RIGHT PRINCIPLES IS ESSENTIAL TO EFFECT RIGHT RELATIONS.

IN the widening field of medical science coöperation of the related professions is essential to the extent of a belief of the members of one in the importance of those of the other. Individuals of different professions may work together, but each class is best qualified to render service in the department for which the individuals have been trained by experience and education. It is almost needless to say here that pharmacists are enabled to understand what they see and do, because of adequate education and underlying professional attainments—a little knowledge may become a source of danger, nowhere more than in the handling of drugs.

At the formal opening of Johns Hopkins (1876) Thomas H. Huxley delivered an address on "University Education." We are taking the liberty of quoting the following which applies to medical and pharmaceutical education:

"Again, *Materia Medica*, so far as it is a knowledge of drugs, is the business of the druggist. In all other callings the necessity of the division of labor is fully recognized, and it is absurd to require of the medical man that he should avail himself of the special knowledge of those whose business it is to deal in the drugs which he uses. . . ."

"All knowledge is good. It is impossible to say that any fragment of knowledge, however insignificant or remote from one's ordinary pursuits, may not some day be turned to account. But in medical education, above all things, it is to be recollected that, in order to know a little well, one must be content to be ignorant of a great deal."

The striving for position is accompanied by danger, unless he who desires to obtain it has a humanitarian object or service in view, and has first prepared himself to fulfill, intelligently, duties it imposes. Nor is it right for those in authority to impose duties on those who are not qualified to discharge them. Members of a profession are so interdependent that every thought and action by an individual who ventures into its activities affects all to a greater or lesser degree; the individual is to some extent, whether he would or not, his brother's keeper; there are to-day many who fail to realize that wherever they are, whatever position they may hold, their work must be done well, or they will discredit others.

A purpose of this comment is to direct attention to the causes which led up to the error at Fort Leavenworth, in compounding a prescription containing atropine. "To err is human"—a pharmacy graduate may be so distracted and, as a result, make the same fatal error as an untrained pharmacist, but the latter is *constantly* in danger of making mistakes in compounding, because of lacking in knowledge and experience, and is very fortunate if he does not. The writer recalls mishaps in prescription-writing; also, a quiz at medical school when the dosage of hydrocyanic acid was asked for—the reply—"one teaspoonful." Later, when the young man wanted to correct his error—the quiz-master replied—"it is not necessary, for the patient is dead." All of this points to the necessity of constant watchfulness, that only qualified pharmacists should be entrusted with the dispensing of medicines; that it is not right to place an individual in charge of duties endangering life, who is not trained and experienced, and that close coöperation between the medical and pharmaceutical professions should obtain.

Pharmacy has contributed largely to the progress of medicine; pharmacy schools require that the preliminary education of the matriculants be not less than that of high school and the students, thereafter, devote at least three years to pharmacy college work before graduation, followed by a State Board of Pharmacy examination. In 1932 another year will be added to the pharmacy course. Mention of this is made for the purpose of stressing that there is no reason whatever for declining professional recognition to pharmacists, and that the Government should be as exacting as States in requirements for pharmacists in its Service.

There are sufficient reasons for calling attention to the necessity for having pharmacists in charge of the pharmacies in all hospitals, and one of the essential requirements for a standard hospital should be that a qualified pharmacist is in charge of its pharmacy. The public has a right to expect and to investigate the coöperation of the professions, and to determine whether they are giving it the best service and protection possible.