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"CHOOSE YOUR OWN DOCTOR"

(Written for "The Listener" by ELSIE LOCKE)

TWO little phrases of magical import are familiar to all who read current comment on our health services by the B.M.A., official commissions, newspaper editorials and whatnot. They are "the right of the patient to choose his own medical adviser" and "the personal relationship between doctor and patient." With minor variations, the refrain has been sung recently in connection with the proposed co-ordinated medical services of the new housing areas in the Hutt Valley, and with the Committee of Inquiry's report on maternity services.

I am slightly puzzled as to why my "right of choice" should be so sacred in this particular professional service when no one thinks of granting it to me in certain other services. I am also puzzled as to why I am credited with the skill to make the best possible choice, and why my relationship with the doctor will be "impersonal" if I do not have this right?

Surely it cannot be that brains are of less importance than boils or bunions, since neither I nor my parents had any choice in the class teachers to whom my education was entrusted? We did not even choose my headmaster, though it could not be said that our relations were exactly "impersonal." To be honest, we children regarded him so affectionately that he was never called anything among ourselves but "Old Dick," and he usually referred to me no less intimately as "that awful child."

Neither did we, later on, choose professors, lecturers, Plunket nurses, or ward sisters. Nor were any of these "impersonal." On the whole, it is unlikely that our relationships could have been any more friendly and intimate had they been specially selected.

It is true that one does choose one's dentist and one's lawyers. My own first efforts were singularly unfortunate. Lacking any other criterion, I once patronised a dentist because he reminded me of a Dickens character and this actually made my visits enjoyable. About five years later his fillings had to be ploughed out and replaced at the Wellington Public Hospital Dental Department. Some years later again, a dentist in another town asked me if those fillings were the work of Mr. R. at the Wellington Hospital? Maybe he was an impersonal servant of a soulless institution—but Mr. R.'s work was esteemed far and wide.

The first time I chose a lawyer I relied on his excellent reputation and clientele. He charged me £2/10/- for a brief interview and a scrap of advice that proved to be the exact reverse of correct.

With these unhappy experiences in mind, I ponder: How does the wise layman choose his medical adviser?

Obviously there are many advantages to a life-long association with a "real

old family doctor"—one who knows the family and its history, and is an ever-present help in time of trouble, even if he is not quite as ubiquitous as "Doctor Mac" of radio fame. The question in this age of specialisation is, how do you find him?

He seems to live mainly in the country—but that is not very helpful to our general difficulty—for in the country we usually have the choice of one doctor or none.

He is becoming more rare in the cities, where only an old-established



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family and an old-established practice together can really achieve an intimate relationship on a "family" basis.

What then does a person do who is not satisfied with the doctor his parents had, or has moved into a new district, or needs medical attention for the first time?

He asks his friends, his fellow-hospital-patients, or maybe his grocer or the baker's boy. "Can you recommend a good doctor?" "Whom do you suggest I should go to?" The friend, or the baker's boy, probably says that X did a lot of good with his own great aunt's asthma. So the inquirer goes off to Dr. X to have his gastric ulcer cured.

It is a hit and miss method, though superior to the choice of Dr. Y because he is SO charming, or because his wife was Miss Z, you know, her people own acres and acres of land up in the hills and they had eight bridesmaids at their wedding.

This might be the beginning of a personal relationship—provided that Dr. X can afford the time for his new friend, among the dozens of others who queue up in his surgery. Whether or not, the choice, it seems, helps to safeguard the standards of the medical profession.

For the professors, on the other hand, life must be rather hard. They have no choice-by-students to safeguard their standards. Somehow or other they do manage to give excellent service, as do educationists from probationary teachers upwards. There is a drawback, however, to the professor's not accepting individual students with individual fees for himself. His brother, the doctor, may attract enough patients to earn two or three times the fixed salary of the professor.

Let it be plain here that I would be the last person to be unappreciative of (continued on next page)