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MEMORIAL

OF

CERTAIN SURGEONS OF THE UNITED STATES NAVY,

PRAYING

THAT CERTAIN REGULATIONS BE ADOPTED

FOR THE

ADMISSION OF CANDIDATES,

AND THAT

THE PAY OF SURGEONS IN THE NAVY BE INCREASED.

JANUARY 25, 1828.

Printed by order of the Senate of the United States.

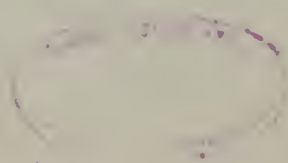


WASHINGTON:

PRINTED BY DUFF GREEN.

1828.

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U. S. SHIP DELAWARE,
OFF ANNAPOLIS, *Jan. 12, 1828.*

SIR: I am deputed by a meeting of the Surgeons and Assistant Surgeons of the Navy, recently held in Philadelphia, to present you the accompanying memorial, which I respectfully request may be submitted for the consideration of the honorable body in which you preside.

I am instructed to solicit your attention to a subject, which we hope its importance demands; and while, with deep concern for its success, we appeal to the good sense and sound judgment of the National Legislature, we confidently rely on its justice for that relief which we humbly conceive is founded on the most correct views of the service, and in the best policy of the country.

With great respect, I have the honor to be

Your obedient servant,

JOHN A. KEARNEY,
Surgeon U. S. Navy.

To His Excellency JOHN C. CALHOUN,
*Vice-President of the United States,
and President of the Senate.*

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*To the Honorable, the Senate and House of Representatives of the
United States of America, in Congress assembled;*

The undersigned, Surgeons of the Navy of the United States, most respectfully, but earnestly, solicit the attention of your honorable bodies to a frank exposition of the peculiar hardships under which, in common with all of similar grade in the service, they are placed by the existing laws and regulations respecting the Navy.

We shall not be accused of attaching undue importance to the medical profession, when we assert that, in its capacity for good or evil, and in the fearfulness of its responsibility, it is not surpassed by any other human agency. Under the administration of Divine Providence, the health and strength of human beings, even the issues of life and death, are in the hands of such as are, or profess to be, skilled in the medical science. In proportion to the dignity and responsibility of the profession is, or ought to be, in all cases, the degree of preparation with which its members enter upon the discharge of their duties. An uneducated physician is an evil and a nuisance, second only to a pestilence in destructiveness; and in most civilized countries a due regard to the welfare of the people has established periods of probation and discipline for the medical practitioner, the necessity of which all history has confirmed. Years of preparatory education are necessary before the candidate for medical knowledge is fit to commence the peculiar studies of his profession. Years of expensive instruction and laborious diligence are required, before he can be prepared to enter upon its practice; and even then years of unremitting study and clinical experience are commonly passed before the educated and admitted physician is generally intrusted with the lives and limbs of his fellow-citizens. Such are the restraints most rightfully, we think, imposed by law and custom, upon the initial operations of medical men, in the *civil* pursuits of their profession. Nor is there any thing, we conceive, in the character or situation, physical or moral, of the persons who compose the *naval* force of the United States, to render expedient a different system of medical education, or in any other respect to make it proper that the standard of medical character should be lowered, as regards them. The lives and comforts of our naval officers, and of those intrepid seamen who have carried our banner in triumph over the most distant seas, are, we respectfully submit, as important to them, and perhaps as valuable to their country, as those of any other

class of our fellow-citizens. They are subject to like diseases with the rest of mankind, and to casualties and wounds from which persons of other pursuits are mostly exempt. They are necessarily carried, by duty, into remote and unhealthy climates; and become liable to disorders arising from exposure to storms and inclement atmospheres. Added, therefore, to the general training and knowledge of his professional brethren in civil life, the naval surgeon must have studied the constitution and character of seamen, and must be prepared for the various accidents, and different maladies of foreign origin, to which they are constantly exposed. With all this, the naval surgeon must so furnish and provide himself as to maintain a suitable standing with his brother officers, and due estimation with the seamen; and on foreign voyages, and in expensive countries, sustain, in his intercourse with foreigners, the character of his profession, and the dignity of our Republic.

To compensate him for an education so elaborate, for preparations and materials so expensive, for services so severe and laborious, for the exposure of his own health and life, under every variety of danger and suffering, it might be supposed, by our fellow-citizens, to whom the laws respecting the Navy are not familiar, that a competent annual allowance of pay and rations was made by the Government for the present support of a naval surgeon and his family; and to provide a pittance for that season of life, when the infirmities of age, or perhaps a constitution prematurely broken down in the public service, forbid his continuance in his country's employment. We approach your honorable bodies in the belief that this impression has prevailed, even in the minds of Congress, and with the conviction, that it is only necessary to exhibit a brief view of the operation of the existing laws, to convince the Legislature, and our fellow-citizens, of the striking disproportion that exists between our services and our compensation; and to satisfy them that no class of men under the Government of the United States is so inadequately remunerated.

The pay allowed to Surgeons in the Navy was established by an act of Congress passed in the year 1799, at a period when the Navy was in its cradle, and legislation respecting it was little more than experiment, through want of the necessary knowledge and experience. The law simply enacts that the pay and subsistence of a *Surgeon* in the Navy shall be *fifty* dollars per month, and two rations a day; and that a *Surgeon's Mate* shall receive *thirty* dollars per month, and the same daily amount of rations: a provision which, we think, must at the first glance strike your honorable bodies as deficient, both in respect to the amount of pay, and in the absence of suitable regulations for the apportionment of pay to length of services; and for the due examination of surgical candidates. In the first place, we respectfully submit, that the amount of pay provided by this act is utterly insufficient for the necessary wants of a naval surgeon. Whatever may be thought of an allowance of 360 dollars per annum, and rations, for a surgeon's mate; who being, in most cases, unincumbered with a family: may, perhaps, by denying himself all but mere necessaries, be able to

subsidist upon that sum; yet, certainly, for the surgeon of maturer years, upon whom, beings unable to maintain themselves, are often dependent, the money allowance of six hundred dollars a year must be acknowledged to be entirely inadequate. Were there no force in the suggestions we have offered respecting the length of necessary apprenticeship to the medical art; if the education of a physician were not expensive, nor the materials of his business costly; yet in reference to the unavoidable personal expenses of the officer, and those of his children, or other dependants upon him, living in the most economical manner, in the cheapest parts of our sea coast, we are confident that we need not appeal to the sympathies, but to the sense of justice of your honorable bodies, for evidence of the necessity of a more sufficient remuneration. We are far from intending to complain of the Congress of 1799, by which this act was passed. They doubtless supposed that future legislators would make such amendments to their provisions as experience should prove to be requisite; but while, in some respects, other branches of the service have been advanced with the increasing dignity and prosperity of the Republic, the office of naval surgeon remains, in all respects, as it was instituted thirty years ago.

In the next place, we respectfully submit, that the existing law is defective in not providing some increase of pay, graduated according to the length of service, and consequently the increased experience of the surgical officer. For him the usual incentives to an honorable and useful ambition are totally wanting. No prospect of higher grade or increased compensation animates him to more distinguished exertions. No inducement is held out to him to prolong the employment in the public service, of his hard earned knowledge and experience. Before him lies only a life of perpetual struggle with an inadequate income, of abstinence from the necessary and honorable relations of society, or the spectacle of a family without sufficient means of support, and in more remote prospective, perhaps, of a helpless and dependent group of orphans. In every other branch of the service he perceives a regular gradation of rank and pay, tempting the honest ambition, and rewarding the faithful services of the officer. The midshipman looks forward with eagerness to the period when he shall be promoted to the rank of lieutenant; the lieutenant to that of master commandant; the master commandant to that of captain; and the latter has in most navies many higher steps before him. Each is animated and invigorated by the prospect; and each knowing that his success in reaching the next elevation depends upon his fidelity and exertions, finds in these circumstances sufficient stimulus and incitement, of which the naval surgeon is deprived. This disproportion will perhaps more strikingly appear, when it is considered that in no other rank in the navy is that expensive professional education, to which we have adverted, required as a preliminary qualification for admission.

We respectfully represent, in the third place, that the existing act is defective, inasmuch as it makes no provision for the due examination of candidates for the post of surgeon's mate, and subsequently for the office of surgeon. We believe that such examination by a competent

board is required by the regulations of all other governments possessing a naval force; and we conceive that the advantages of the provision are so obvious as to render it unnecessary for us to trespass on the time of Congress by enumerating them.

If the situation of the surgical officers of our navy be compared with that of other nations, we respectfully submit to your honorable bodies, that the contrast will be found to be humiliating to the feelings of the former, and derogatory to the national character. In the navy of Great Britain, with which we come most frequently in competition, two classes of medical officers exist, *viz*: *physicians* and *surgeons*; and in each of them a graduated scale is established, by which compensation is proportioned to services. The British *surgeon* who has served less than *six* years, receives \$2 22 per diem, or upwards of \$800 per annum: When he has served *more* than *six* years, he receives \$2 44 per diem, or nearly \$900 per annum: After *ten* years service he receives \$3 11 per diem, or \$1135 per annum; and after *twenty* years service, \$4 33 per diem, or upwards of \$1580 per annum. The British *physician* of *less* than *three* years service receives \$1,700 per annum; of *more* than *three* and *less* than *ten* years service, upwards of \$2,500 per annum; and when *longer* than *ten* years in the service, he receives more than \$3,566 per annum; or nearly *six* times as much as the oldest medical officer in our service can possibly receive, under the existing laws. In each class, too, half pay is liberally allowed by the British government, when the officer retires from active service, after having served a certain period, or after having contracted ill health in the service. In the *French* navy the pay and allowances of the medical officers are upon a scale of equal liberality with those of the British, and commensurate with the known learning and ability of the profession in that country. Our neighbor republic of Mexico allows its full surgeons \$135 per month, or \$1620 a year; *more* than *thrice* as much as are allowed by the laws of the United States to the same rank. The assistant surgeons are paid, we understand, in full proportion. It is unnecessary for us, we trust, to remark upon the inducements that are thus held out to the medical officers of the United States Navy, to exchange her service for that of our sister Republic, where they carry their valuable experience, and receive a more sufficient support for themselves and their families.

We are not desirous that the Congress of the United States should adopt the regulations of the foreign governments we have mentioned, in their full extent; but we beg leave respectfully to state that, particularly in the case of the British government, the enlarged allowance, above stated, was the result of the lessons of experience, inculcated by years of mismanagement and suffering. About a century ago, the medical officers of the British navy were paid in somewhat of the same proportion with the surgeons of our navy, under the present laws. The consequence was, that the appointment of surgeon was accepted only by very young men, as a school of experiment; and was abandoned whenever an opportunity occurred of entering into private practice. It thus happened that officers and seamen were alike made the subjects, and often the victims, of ignorance and presumption:

and many valuable lives were lost to the country, which are now preserved by more skilful treatment. The present European system, therefore, was the offspring of necessity and experience; which have fortunately secured for the medical department of their navies the services of some of the most distinguished surgeons and physicians, from whose labors not only the subjects of their professional jurisdiction, but the whole community, have derived the most salutary lessons.

The same causes, we most respectfully suggest, will produce similar results upon the medical service in this country. The constitution of human nature is the same on each side of the Atlantic; and if there be any difference in the situation of the American and European medical officer, it will be found that the inducements to remain in the service have been greater in the latter case; because the overstocked professions of Europe afford little opportunity for success in civil life. Unless some change be effected by the wisdom of Congress, in the present law, so as to confer a more adequate allowance on naval surgeons, increasing in however small a ratio with increasing years and services, we fear that the Navy of the United States is destined to undergo the same lamentable servitude to ignorance and experience, as history proves to have been endured by other and older countries. The American naval surgeon, who, after years of faithful service, finds a family growing up around him, must either abandon his official station, or attempt to connect it with private practice, which, in most cases, is not feasible, without neglect of naval duty. He must, then, however reluctantly, decide to withdraw from the service, and resort to the more lucrative and inviting prospects of civil practice. Such, in all human probability, will be the inevitable but undesirable destiny of the senior medical officers of the Navy; and thus will skill and experience be periodically lost to the Navy, and a perpetual stream of youth and ignorance will be flowing in upon the station, to whose guardian care will be committed the heavy and responsible trust of the lives and limbs of the gallant defenders of their country.

We are aware that it may be urged as a reply to our suggestion, that many experienced and skilful men are now enrolled among the Navy surgeons; and it may be asked why they should continue in the service, if the emoluments of their office are inadequate for their proper support? To this we respectfully answer, that it is true many surgeons are yet to be found in the service after years of labor and devotion, some of whom have passed through the battles and sufferings of the last war, and begin now to feel the admonitions of increasing years, and the burden of increasing expenses, without that correspondent augmentation of means and prospects, which, in other services and professions, is sure to accompany an honest and capable discharge of duty. They *have* clung to their country's service, however, and may continue to adhere to it under all discouragements; not wisely, perhaps, but ardently; not from reason, it may be, but from a feeling which it is trusted will find rather approbation than censure—a feeling of attachment to their profession, and of reverential devotion to that star-span-gled banner, with whose glories they feel themselves, however remote-

ly, connected; and to be divorced from which, would be to break up sympathies and attachments, next only in intenseness to those which unite us to our domestic relations. That some of us, therefore, have submitted to privations and restraints, incompatible with the universal desire of competent support, ought not, we conceive, to be urged as invalidating the force of our representations, founded as they are upon reasonings and principles, the general strength of which, we believe, cannot be shaken. If men of capacity and education should still continue to attach themselves to the profession, under existing disadvantages, they will, we fear, be rare and insulated exceptions, upon whose slight and uncertain foundation, we most respectfully submit, no wise and patriotic Legislature ought to build up a system intended for permanent usefulness. It is true that vacancies may not remain long unsupplied, and that persons may always be found ready to fill the office of Navy Surgeon, as of any other appointment. But we again urge, that without skill and experience, especially of that peculiar experience which can be derived only from long practical observation of seamen, no one ought to be intrusted with the medical charge of a vessel. No saving to the public treasury, such as the existing regulations effect, can compensate, we conceive, for the sacrifice of the lives of our officers and seamen, and perhaps the consequent loss of our vessels, which would result from medical ignorance. An enlarged economy, which looks to the future as well as to the present, and embraces consequences and results in its grasp, will always provide such competent maintenance for the office of naval surgeon, as will attract to, and continue in it, the highest order of talents and ability.

The subscribers, therefore, with unfeigned deference to the wisdom of Congress, but with an anxiety created by the conviction that they are petitioning, not for themselves alone, but for the interests of the whole Navy of the Republic, do respectfully request that your honorable bodies will make such alterations in the present acts in relation to the Medical Department of the Navy, as will provide for a due and sufficient examination of all candidates for a medical or surgical station, and for such graduated augmentation of pay as may furnish a decent subsistence for those surgeons who have passed the prime of their lives in the service of their country.

JNO. A. KEARNEY, *Surgeon.*

THO. HARRIS, *Surgeon.*

WILLIAM P. C. BARTON, *Surgeon.*

HENRY WILLIS BASSETT, *Surgeon.*

CHAS. WAYNE, *Surgeon's Mate.*

MIFFLIN COULTER, *Surgeon's Mate.*

G. W. PALMER, *Surgeon's Mate.*

JAMES M. GREENE, *Surgeon's Mate.*

HENRY C. PRATT, *Surgeon's Mate.*

