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We may return unduly long letters to the author for shortening so that we can offer readers as wide a selection as possible. We receive so many letters each week that we have to omit some of them. Letters must be signed personally by all their authors. We cannot acknowledge their receipt unless a stamped addressed envelope or an international reply coupon is enclosed.

Hospitals for sick children

SIR,—In his interesting paper on John Bunnell Davis (5 May, p 1191) Dr I S L Loudon assesses the role of Dr Charles West as a physician of the Universal Dispensary for Children and as the founder of the Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond Street. May I make the following comments?

The care for children in the first half of the nineteenth century gained momentum under the influence of social and economic changes. This is best illustrated by the following quotation from Angus Wilson:

"Dickens's long line of living children are the victims of two views of life—the Benthamite, economic treatment of the young as units of memory and learning, a sort of sponge to absorb facts in order that they may take their useful place in a money organised society; or secondly, as the victims of the Calvinistic view of children as limbs of Satan, as unregenerate small mommets. Both views surely have their roots in the eighteenth century. Both deny the Dickensian world of love and imagination."¹

In the eighteenth century children had been considered expendable, and a child's death was considered an act of God. George Armstrong's merit was that he believed that the child's lot could be improved by founding the first Dispensary for the Infant Poor, but he was hostile to the idea of an inpatient hospital for children, as the following quotation shows:

"Several Friends of the Charity have thought it necessary to have a house fitted up for the Reception of such Infants as are very ill where they might be accommodated in the same Manner as Adults are in other Hospitals. But a very little Reflection will clearly convince any thinking Person that such a scheme can never be executed. If you take away a

sick Child from its Parent or Nurse you will break its Heart immediately; and if there must be a Nurse to each Child what kind of an Hospital must there be to contain any Number of them? Besides, in this case the Wards must be crowded with grown Persons as well as Children; must not the Air of the Hospital be thereby much contaminated?..."²

His influence was immense and had its lasting effect on following generations of physicians. The nineteenth century introduced alterations in the status of children, who were now loved for their own sake. Efforts were made for their spiritual and bodily care. The Factory Act of 1833 made child labour under the age of 9 illegal; under 13 not more than 48 hours' work was permitted in one week.³ Trevelyan states: "This enlarged sympathy with children was one of the chief contributions made by the Victorian English to real civilisation."⁴ Charles West was the son of this era, with a strong religious nonconformist background. He was aware of George Armstrong's views. He went to the Continent (Bonn and Paris) in 1835 and to Berlin in 1837 to obtain his doctorate.⁵ It is important to recall that West introduced domiciliary visits when he worked at the Universal Dispensary.

There are therefore many strands in his motivation to found an inpatient children's hospital, of which the more important are, firstly, the changed atmosphere for love and sympathy for the child in the nineteenth century, which West supported with enthusiasm; secondly, his conviction that good treatment of children's diseases was only possible in a proper children's hospital, an experience gained from his domiciliary visits

and studies abroad; thirdly, the existence of children's hospitals in Continental cities, as observed during his travels and studies there; and, finally, his knowledge acquired in England, France, Germany, and Ireland that scientific medicine was on the march and making enormous strides.

FELIX S BESSER

The Hospital for Sick Children,
London WC1N 3JH

¹ Wilson, A, *The World of Charles Dickens*. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1972.

² Armstrong, G, *A General Account of the Dispensary for the Infant Poor*. 1772.

³ Langdon-Davies, J, *Shafesbury and the Working Children*, Jackdaw No 7. London, Jonathan Cape, 1964.

⁴ Trevelyan, G M, *Illustrated English Social History*. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1964.

⁵ Besser, F S, *Great Ormond Street Gazette*, Winter 1973.

SIR,—Dr I S L Loudon (5 May, p 1191) mentions the frustration experienced by Charles West when he failed to persuade the committee of the Royal Universal Infirmary for Children to make provision for inpatients.

I have found an echo of that frustration in a letter in my possession which he wrote at the time to a Belfast physician, Andrew Malcolm, who had written to West for information about children's hospitals. The letter, dated 24 January 1848, reads:

Dear Sir:

Your very courteous note reached me one or two days ago and I can assure you that nothing would have given me greater pleasure than to reply to your enquiries.

The institution with which I am connected however, though called the Infirmary for Children, is in reality no infirmary, but merely a dispensary, so that no information concerning it would be of any service to you in your enquiries.

Wishing you every success in the object you have in mind.

I am yours faithfully
Charles West

It may perhaps save you some trouble if I add that