Correspondence

Letters to the Editor should not exceed 500 words.

The Business of the B.M.A.

SIR,—May I congratulate your leader writer ("Ostriches," 1 August, p. 261) and *Pertinax* (1 August, p. 309) on stating some basic principles and on their courage in doing so almost alone? Their courage is the more laudable when compared to the pusillanimous verbal scurrying reported in Proceedings of Council (1 August, *Supplement*, p. 103), when Mr. P. Vaughan turned the searchlight of the press on its members. It is a tragic commentary on Council that their Press Officer had finally to remind them of their duty "to have the courage of the R.B.'s convictions." It is to be hoped this will be remembered in next year's polls.

Predictably, press comment has been almost uniformly against the two major R.B. decisions on charges. There are always shrieks of pain when anyone attempts to open closed minds, but the business of the B.M.A. is to guide Government and people in matters of health, and to do this without fear or favour. This mandate must extend beyond clinical matters to the broader issue of provision of health services. To pretend the B.M.A. is outwith politics is nonsense; to suggest that we should become so is craven. I submit that the resolutions on charges reflect the considered opinion of most of the country's doctors, and not a few of its patients. The present system of free access clogs surgeries with patients living from one bowel action to the next on pints of N.H.S. paraffin, to the detriment of the young mother whose cervical cancer goes undetected for lack of time to take a smear.

It is the business of the B.M.A. to expose this system as a fraud perpetrated on the public by the politicians of both major parties, a fraud which is actively detrimental to the health of the nation. The N.H.S. needs more doctors and more time, and free access is not the way to get either. Mythical new hospitals will not influence the situation in time, and the barely concealed direction of labour proposed by the Medical Practices Committee will effectively reduce the standard of service in areas at present adequately doctored without materially helping the less fortunate areas. Instead it will undoubtedly increase the emigration rate. It is sad to see the Fraser Committee endorsing this policy of minimum service for all. The pathetic suggestions for public education against abuse of a free service can scarcely be taken seriously in the light of the spectacular failure of similar campaigns against smoking and road accidents. One may as well campaign against the acceptance of free sample offers from detergent or tooth-paste firms.

Inevitably, these facts are unpalatable, but it is for the B.M.A. to state them without equivocation and have the guts to do so without fearing injury from press or politician. If we do so, the public will accept them and respect us for our honesty; if we do not, then we shall be more to blame for the impending

collapse of the N.H.S. than anyone. And who, pray, will the press turn on then?—I am, etc.,

Angmering-on-Sea,
Sussex.

A. L. BUSSEY.

SIR,—The leader, "Ostriches" (1 August, p. 261), makes excellent reading, and its theme deserves the fullest support.

Only by allowing a full and free expression of opinion in editorials, letters, and the reporting of all meetings shall we succeed in our efforts to improve our present situation. In my opinion the *Journal* is doing exactly this; and when we succeed in our efforts no small part will have been played by you as its editor.—I am, etc.,

Leeds 2.

S. C. CRYSTAL.

SIR,—The penultimate sentence of your leading article (1 August, p. 261) suggests that some direct payment by the patient would evoke "a more acute sense of responsibility from the doctor."

This statement seems to me not merely extraordinary but a truly alarming indication of how the ethical standards of the profession are wearing thin. There is, of course, nothing immoral about payment for medical service; but surely the suggestion that better ("more responsible") service is given for direct pay instantly commercializes the practice of medicine and is never to be condoned.

How many practising doctors, I wonder, are really represented by the B.M.A.? Surely a referendum would be necessary before introducing any fundamental change?—I am, etc.,

London W.8.

JUDITH M. WATERLOW.

The Right to Strike

SIR,—In your leading article, "Ostriches" (1 August, p. 261), you make the statement that "no one calls in question its [the Post Office Workers Union] right to strike to enforce what it believes to be the rights of its members to better pay." That, I submit, is untrue. Many people utterly abhor the use of the strike weapon, especially by public servants, as it injures every man, woman, and child in the country to obtain what is after all a selfish end, whether it is right or wrong. In the armed Forces this would be mutiny. Do you suggest that mutiny for increased pay is justifiable? Do you suggest that doctors or policemen have the right to withhold their services to force redress of their wrongs? Some would say that such action would be allowable, and give yet another

example of the moral sterility of this pagan age, in which the sole standard of conduct is "How much can I get out of life for myself—and to hell with the rest of humanity"? This is the action of the malignant growth, which destroys the whole body in its own insatiable greed for life.—I am, etc.,

Leicester.

J. VERNON C. BRAITHWAITE.

Charges for Patients

SIR,—What a pity we let double negatives creep in to supply the obscurantistically minded with more talk, and so weaken our case. For surely time has shown (what we as doctors should have known already) that requirement No. 1 to make the Health Service healthy for patient, doctor, and State is an item-of-service payment.

Think of the waste of beef if first-quality cuts were free for all. Socialism in that sense is abhorrent to nature and inimical to the processes of evolution, which can only work on differentials.

Old Gilbert was quite right when he wrote:

"If everybody's somebody
then no one's anybody."

Then civilization disintegrates and chaos comes again.—I am, etc.,

Buxted, Sussex.

W. R. E. HARRISON.

SIR,—This week's bag of woolly thinking by the apologists for a free health service takes a bit of beating. Why do they always deal in the legal term of "Is it possible?" instead of the more useful term of "Is it reasonable?" And, anyway, just what is wrong with taking a fee? After all, I am a *professional*, not an enthusiastic amateur, nor yet a charitable institution!

Further, we should not dwell too much about our public image. My public image is the quality of work I do, and it will not be tarnished by a few shillings' fee. As for what or when it is politic or impolitic to do a thing, politics have bedevilled the N.H.S. ever since Bevan introduced cheap votes for cheap medicine, and this is one of the factors I am in clear and open revolt against.

I insure my house against disaster, not a broken tumbler. If I break a tumbler I must pay for a new one myself. Health insurance should be against the financial ravages of illness, not against a thorn in a finger (that might go septic, who is to say?) or water in the ear after bathing (that might, I suppose, be commencement of an otitis, leading to a mastoid, leading to intracranial involvement and death) because the poor bather could not afford his cigarettes and my fee at the same time.

However, I think a 5s. fee for attendance (with the *B.N.F.* drugs free, if you like—which would be a worth while but impolitic measure) would cause some lessening in the sea of trivia that I see, and allow me the better to give time and trouble to the more seriously ill, and treat the general run less