MOTOR NOTES FOR MEDICAL MEN.

BY H. MASSAC BUIST.

THE SPARE PART PROBLEM.

RECENT correspondence in these columns has revealed that a number of medical men resident in various parts of the country have a common experience in discovering that it is next to impossible to obtain deliveries of spare parts for their motor cars; while others complain of the unreasonable delays of procedure. Some of these correspondents appear to imagine that I have not touched on the subject. That must be due to a lapse of memory on their part, in that it is one of the problems that has been referred to by me frequently in these columns since the Armistice. More than once stress has been laid on the fact that the choice of a car for a medical man should be governed largely by investigation as to the probability of spare parts being available promptly as and when they shall be needed. This had to be touched on, for example, at the time that changes of models, liquidations of companies, difficulties in regard to labour problems, and so forth, were discussed. As it appears, however, that the urgency of the matter has not been sufficiently appreciated by many of those concerned, it may be of service to draw attention to the fact that the medical man's choice of motor vehicles is necessarily and always very much narrower than that of the general public. On the one hand, the medical man cannot afford to indulge in experiments, because his car is needed to be ready to take him anywhere at any time all the year round; whereas the average member of the public can motor more or less at his option. In practice, this means that, whereas the average member of the public can try an entirely new type model if it embodies points that appeal to him, the medical man cannot take such a risk, because it is a long established fact that even the biggest firms have to give a new type at least twelve months' run in the hands of the public before they can discover all the things that are likely to go wrong with it in charge of the general user, as distinct from those points that are revealed when the experimental and earlier examples of the given type are put through all manner of tests in the hands of their staffs, although many of the tests represent even more deliberate abuse than cars receive occasionally at the hands of some owners or their paid drivers. It is only after a car type has been on the market twelve months that medical men are justified in buying it, provided the result of such test is that the model has proved itself to be a suitable one. But that is not the only ground on which the medical man's choice is necessarily restricted. A factor that operates to a greater extent in most cases concerns the obtaining of spare parts. Under normal conditions this problem will be present always. In the current abnormal conditions it is in evidence to a greater extent than ever before.

REPLACEMENTS FOR OLD MODELS.

We may therefore take the three main examples which the medical man should have in mind:

Sometimes where a medical man knows the person who has owned a certain car he can economize capital outlay by buying it at secondhand, because he has personal knowledge that it has never been abused. In no other circumstances should a used car be acquired by a medical man. Such machines do not carry the maker's guarantee against the failure of parts, and so on. In exceptional cases where it is apparent that, as a mere capital outlay, the individual medical man will be doing well to acquire a particular car, in that he cannot obtain any new one to give corresponding service for anything like the same sum of money, nevertheless before making his final decision he should ask himself how old the particular model is, and take steps, not merely to discover how the nearest local authorized agent of the given make of car is situated in regard to stocks of spare parts, but also what is the position of the manufacturer behind the agent. Some 2,000 parts go to the construction of the average motor car. Few builders who have established their reputations over a period of years and who are therefore of the class most likely to serve medical men well, have put through fewer than twenty satisfactory standard models in the course of their

enterprise. It will therefore be appreciated that it is as well a financial as a physical impossibility to carry for an indefinite period a stock of spare parts for all types. To deal with the problem some manufacturers, such as Rover, have removed the jigs, patterns, dies, and other necessities for producing the parts of old models and have set up entirely separate establishments, sometimes a hundred miles away from the factory, where there is installed the necessary machinery for making such parts to order. But in these days of excessive taxation and ever-increasing financial stringency obviously it is impossible for any manufacturer who does not chance to have had a lot of spare parts left over before the war—and that case would indicate that his car had not been very much of a success—to have on hand in these days of high costs of material and labour, and on falling markets, a big post-war production of spare parts for obsolete models. Where a car is of a model which was abandoned at the time war broke out most of the spare parts needed nowadays have to be made to order, and that takes time. In this connexion I would mention that the medical man derives one incidental advantage from circumstances over which, it chances, no one has any control: as the price of materials and wages is coming down, such parts are likely to be made cheaper and more cheaply as time goes on. But, more important than getting a few shillings off a spare part, is the question of the medical man getting it promptly. It is because we cannot rule out the time factor in this connexion, and because, in any case, spare parts which have to be made to order cost much more than those which go through in series, that the medical man should be chary of acquiring out-of-date models, although the initial cost is often very tempting. Of course there are certain parts of the vast numbers that go to the assembling of a car which are sometimes carried in stock for out-of-date models because the books of the given firm tell them at what periods such parts are due to be worn out; therefore, from the numbers of cars that have been sold, they have a very clear idea of what will be the demand for such parts and when it will arise. But many parts need replacement merely because an accident has occurred. Ten to one such parts will not be stocked, because they are not portions that wear out in the normal course of motoring.

SUPPLIES FOR FOREIGN BUILT CARS.

The second point concerns foreign built cars. Both in the pre-war and the post-war period it has been pointed out many a time that cars, particularly of American makes, are sold by firms registered here each with a limited capital liability of not more than £10,000; yet each of such concerns will sell in a year goods exceeding £250,000 and some of them £1,000,000 in value, every one of the cars disposed of having the maker's full guarantee. Plainly, if anything went wrong with the model the guarantee would not be worth the paper on which it is given, because there is £10,000 capital only behind a quarter of a million pounds, or a million pounds liability, as the case may be. The business in America was built up largely on the principle that service must be given in a manner which, certainly in the pre-war days, was not understood by European manufacturers. While all was going well, of course, the benefit of such service was very plain to the owner. But when things go ill, as they have done in the majority of cases since the war, an entirely different situation obtains. It is for this reason that many American service schemes have broken down in this country. But one must be explicit in this connexion and point out that there have been exceptions in the American industry, some of the firms represented in this country having continued to enjoy successful trading here and being determined to lay their plans for further development of their schemes this year. Hence the exceptional factors concerned are able to continue to give effective service. Likewise, in regard to the Continental industry, there are in France, for example, certain firms which are able to give supplies of spares promptly. But the French motor industry in general is in a very bad case, much worse than our own, in that some of the oldest established French firms have even ceased to be. This topsy-turvy situation obtains in all motor building countries. One has always to recognize the existence of this unknown factor. In addition, the financial status of the authorized

agent through whom any builder or chief concessionaire sells a car to an individual customer situated outside the metropolis will largely govern the facilities given or withheld in regard to obtaining spare parts. Sometimes even in the case of a manufacturer whose business has been reconstructed the new interests decline to have anything to do with the production or marketing of spare parts for obsolete models after stocks have been exhausted, because that part of the business does not pay. In short, this problem is aggravated owing to the extraordinary state of affairs to which the world's industry is subjected as the result of the war. But though the medical man is powerless to control manufacturing conditions, nevertheless he has a certain local radius of vision, as represented, for example, by his inquiries satisfying him as to whether the authorized agents of the car are financially sound. Some agents continue business for months and even years after manufacturers can give them credit no longer, which means necessarily that their customers will suffer occasionally in regard to service, apart altogether from factory problems.

POST-WAR BRITISH SERVICE SCHEMES.

Lastly, we come to the question of home-built machines. Here much the same circumstances govern the manufacturer. The medical man should be informed that the people in charge of practically all the world's motor manufacturing and selling enterprises are not those who appear nominally to be so; but financiers. In nine cases out of ten such folk do not concern themselves with future prospects, but concentrate all their attention on the problems of the moment. In that connexion often the business of spare parts has to be proportionately neglected because the financiers can see at a glance that the prices of labour and raw materials are falling; therefore it is inadvisable to produce parts at current prices to go into stock for an indefinite period, in that the prime aim in endeavouring to negotiate difficult financial times in manufacturing enterprise must be to devote all attention to the production of that which will be liquid and realizable in the minimum time. Happily, on the whole, the outlook at home is not so gloomy as one might imagine on considering these points. For example, such an enterprise as the Vickers concern, the Wolseley Company, has organized a service system which is more complete than any contemplated by Americans in this country. Briefly, the principle is that thirty centres have been established in various parts of these islands, at each of which complete stocks of spare parts of all post-war models are carried, including parts that could not wear out, but which might be damaged by collisions and so forth. Thus the problem of a part needed for replacement through an accident, as distinct from normal wear, can be dealt with right away. It will be appreciated that, by choosing no fewer than thirty centres in such a relatively small area as these islands, it is possible for a customer at any one point to be within at most a 30 miles radius of a source of supply. Again, the question as to whether supplies can be had through a particular local agent from any one of the centres so established is solely a point of the local agent's financial condition at the given time, in that no builder can afford to supply through an agent who is financially unsound. The medical man, however, could easily obtain the name of the nearest of the thirty dépôts and deal with it direct in such circumstances. I have instanced what, as far as I am aware, is the most notable illustration of a British firm establishing a complete service scheme; but I wish to make it understood clearly that a number of British manufacturers are working on similar lines, and that gradually the problem of spare parts will be solved. Moreover, through many of these services out-dated models will also be able to be kept in use.

DEPOSITS SHOULD NOT BE MADE.

So much for the governing circumstances and the various situations which evidently need bringing to the notice of medical men as matter for practical consideration when they are choosing cars. In regard to those who have vehicles already, some will come into conflict with one or other of the particular governing circumstances I have illustrated, and over which one can exercise no control. But medical men must have the use of their cars by hook or by crook. One correspondent writes: "Most

firms intimate that spare part delay can be avoided by leaving with them a credit deposit—of uncertain amount." No such policy should be encouraged by any medical man. It is beyond the power of mortals to foretell what will be the financial condition of any firm in the future. If one went wrong the money so deposited would probably be lost to the medical man who advanced it. The greatest concession any medical man should make in the matter of expediting business is to send cash with his order. But even that should not be done unless he is at least certain that the business of the manufacturer in question is in operation when he sends his order. Cash on delivery is about all that ought to be asked. Of course, the matter is complicated by a number of manufacturers having to change their agents no less in the interests of the public than of themselves. The problem is certainly the most vexed of all those that concern medical motor users at the moment. Yet it is one with which it is practically impossible for the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders to deal because they could not possibly guarantee the financial status of any member. Neither would any form of agreement render it possible to deal with what are the vicissitudes of conducting commercial enterprise. One does see, however, that the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders could at least do something in the matter of urging its members to speed up facilities for spare parts and to have a standard procedure by which, for example, each would always acknowledge promptly an order for a spare part whether he could supply it or not. Fortunately for the credit of the industry and the trade, despite the abnormal circumstances through which we are passing, such experiences as are rightly complained of are the exception rather than the rule. Moreover, I believe it is reasonable to entertain the hope that complaints under this head will tend to be fewer from now onwards. For one thing, the management of local garages is largely passing into the hands of businesslike men. We are not yet at the end of weeding out unsatisfactory agents, but the process is proceeding apace. In connexion with the whole matter, too, some injustice is being done unwittingly in the general confusion. For example, if an owner of a British car cannot obtain spare parts, ten to one he tells all and sundry who will listen to him that no British manufacturer organizes his business properly. The same sort of thing obtains in the case of an owner who has been disappointed about an American car, a French one, and so on.

THE JUST VIEW.

The truth is that one can cite good and bad examples when dealing with cars of any country of origin. By generalizing instead of specifying the individual motorists may do an injury to those very businesses, whether they are of British or foreign origin, which it is desirable to encourage, because they happen to be conducted on the right lines. Every complainant should be most scrupulous to cite the particular make of car and agent in question whenever he is justly spreading his grievances abroad. In no circumstances should sweeping assertions be made, because examples, alike of satisfactory and of unsatisfactory service, could be cited in the case of members of the motor industry or trade of any country. For example, it was the fashion before the war to cite the Americans as the only folk who could give really satisfactory service, and to condemn all others, including the members of the Continental and home trades, by comparison. The fact is that to-day more American firms doing business in this country could be censured under this head than foreign or British ones. That does not mean that it would be fair to condemn all traders in American cars. Than that nothing could be more unjust.

In regard to the Ansaldo car, of which brief mention was made in these columns recently, Messrs. Watkins and Doncaster, Ltd., of Great Portland Street, inform us that the back axle drive is by straight bevel gear, and that detachable wooden wheels are standardized.

It is reported that during the year 1920, deaths resulting from accidents caused by automobiles and other motor vehicles (excluding motor cycles) recorded within the death registration area of the United States (an area which contains 82 per cent. of the total population), numbered 9,106. This represents a death rate of 10.4 per 100,000 of the population.