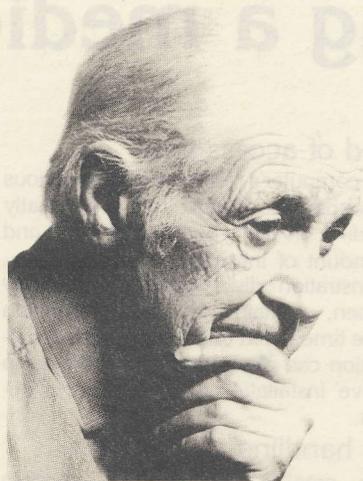


# A universal medical problem

by Celsus



Retirement, or how to occupy one's time during retirement, is a serious question which bothers many doctors. And rightly so!

As every General Practitioner knows from his everyday experience, retirement may be a blessing but it may also be a curse. Too often it is the latter.

In suggesting an answer to the problem, several medical men have said when they retire they will give expression to a long-held wish to write. Some will write their memoirs, some their biographies, some will try poetry, some a medical textbook, some a play, and some will take a shot at the great South African novel.

Let us, for a moment, give thought to the motives for choosing this particular occupation for the hours of retirement. These motives are sometimes summed up in two words, money and fame. Short and sweet; but how valid is this? Surely by the time a medical man retires he will have sufficient of both these commodities: Perhaps not. Like garden compost, it is difficult to have too much money, and for many men, and more especially their wives, it is difficult to have too much fame.

Dr Johnson once said that only fools write for anything else but money. Hillaire Belloc held the same view, yet, Lady Wortley Montagu, the person who must take the blame for introducing smallpox inoculation to England, beguiled old age by writing a history of her own times and burnt quire after quire as soon as it was written. History, alas, does not record whether Lady Montagu wrote purely for the exhilaration of writing or whether she suffered excessively from the cold. There is certainly no evidence that she was a

pyromaniac.

Money and fame, we can, I think take it, are the usual spurs. But how effective are these spurs? Are they spurs at all, or are they merely carrots dangling before, but at a safe distance from, our noses? Experience shows that it is unlikely that any one person will reap significant quantities of either money or fame by the ink in his pen. Still, one never knows, one might be inspired, one might be skillful, one might be sufficiently patient, so, if one has the urge to write, my advice is that one should try it. And the best of luck to you.

There is, I think, another reason for choosing writing as an occupation for retirement; this is a relatively

vague one but it is perhaps the most important of all. It is best expressed by the word 'catharsis' meaning 'mental catharsis'. For many people the effort of putting down on paper their innermost thoughts and emotions, has the effect of clearing the mind and thus inducing a welcome repose where previously there was unrest, if not chaos.

That is a form of psychotherapy which I heartily recommend and I recommend it especially for the depression which so often accompanies retirement, and which so often leads to suicide. Shakespeare said,

*'Give sorrow words. The grief which does not speak whispers he o'er fraught heart and bids it break.'*

There is very good reason why doctors, more than persons of other occupations, should make good writers. They have something to write about, they have spent a lifetime intimately concerned with people in times of conflict and stress. This is the stuff with which drama is made. □

