The General Medical Council and the Teaching of Ophthalmology

The correspondence between the Council of British Ophthalmologists and the General Medical Council concerning the teaching of ophthalmology, published in the September number of this journal, emphasizes the difference of opinion held by these two bodies. The question has been under discussion in our columns on several occasions during the past four years, but it is of such importance to the medical profession and to the public that we feel more than justified in directing attention to it anew.

In 1919, after an exhaustive inquiry into the regulations governing the teaching of ophthalmology and the examinations of students therein in the medical schools of this country and abroad, the Council of British Ophthalmologists submitted to the General Medical Council the recommendation that: "no student shall be considered to have passed the qualifying examination unless he has shown a sound knowledge of practical ophthalmology in an examination conducted by ophthalmic surgeons." (vide Brit. Jl. of Ophthal., vol. 3, p. 165, 1919). It is gratifying to note that this opinion has been emphatically endorsed by the Departmental Committee on the causes and prevention of blindness in their report, published last autumn (Brit. Jl. of Ophthal., 1923, p. 93). That body was impressed by the evidence brought before it "of the inadequate knowledge of diseases of the eye possessed by the large majority of the medical profession on admission to the register . . ." The Council of British Ophthalmologists deemed the appearance of this report a fitting occasion on which to bring the question once more before the General Medical Council; hence the correspondence referred to above.

The letter from the Registrar of the General Medical Council, which we assume emanates from the Council, is not encouraging. The recommendations of the Departmental Committee have apparently been shelved by the well-worn formula "it is too soon to judge of the effect of the resolution recently adopted by the Council." Moreover, the last sentence of his letter, which seems to suggest that credit is due to the Council for anticipating the wishes of the Committee, is distinctly misleading. The Departmental Committee's "wishes" ("recommendations," in the Report) were not that "each student should receive instruction in the diseases of the eye, refraction, and the use of the ophthalmoscope," but that "every student presenting himself for a qualifying examination in medicine shall be examined in ophthalmology."
We confess that we are unable to grasp the mentality of the General Medical Council in reference to compulsory examination in ophthalmology. The experience of many examining bodies has shown not only that it is desirable, but that it can be conducted without difficulty. We venture to hope that, failing action by the General Medical Council, universities and diploma-granting corporations may recognize the desirability, or indeed the necessity, of instituting such examinations as an integral part of their qualifying examination.

Ophthalmic Research in the Combatant Services

A valuable and interesting discussion on ophthalmology in its relation to the Navy, Army, and Air Force took place at the British Medical Association meeting at Portsmouth. We have already (Brit. Jl. of Ophthal., p. 418) mentioned the names of the chief speakers on behalf of the various services and in the ensuing discussion. The President of the Section, Sir John Parsons, pointed out that during the war innumerable ophthalmic problems arose in connection with all three services. In most cases the correct solution could only have been attained by prolonged research, which at that time was often impossible. Action had to be taken on data which were incomplete and faulty. In many cases, notably in the Air Force, ineffective action was attended by serious loss of life and the destruction of valuable material. So impressed were the authorities—and the same applied to the American and other governments—with the imperative need for research in these matters that exhaustive investigations were initiated and are still being carried on. The importance of similar problems arising in connection with naval and military affairs does not impress the authorities with the same dramatic intensity. Yet it is obvious that they should be attacked, and that the proper time to attack them is in peace time. Even in these exigent times money is forthcoming for Industrial and Medical Research, and experience shows that it could not be better invested. The efficiency of the combatant services is a supreme duty which no statesman should dare to neglect, but it can only be attained by constant watchfulness and enterprise, and these are liable to sink into apathy and inertia in the comparative security of peace. The meeting signified its appreciation of the validity of these arguments—so ably exemplified in the remarks of Air-Commodore Munro, Wing-Commander Clements, Gen. Sir Wm. Macpherson, Major Gurley, and Surgeon-Commander Breton—that a resolution urging the Government to carry on research in these ocular problems was carried unanimously.