



West of England Medical Journal

Formerly Bristol Medico-Chirurgical Journal

WEMJ Volume 116 No.1 Article 3. March 2017



The e-journal of the
Bristol Medico-Chirurgical Society

Book Review:

The Dispensaries: Healthcare for the Poor Before the NHS

Britain's forgotten Health-care System

Michael Whitfield

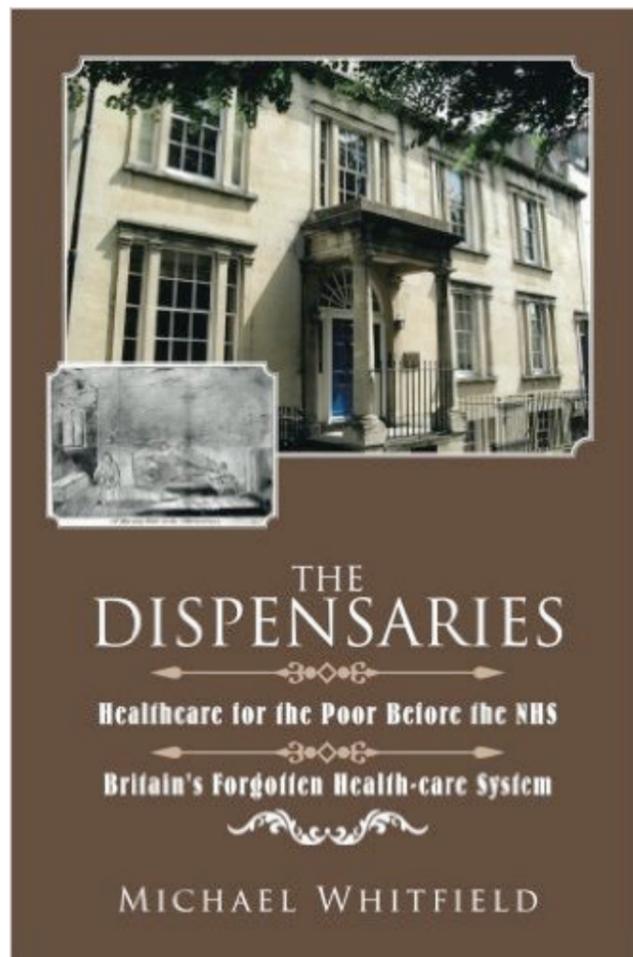
Published by AuthorHouse 2016. ISBN-13: 978-1504997164 £12.95

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AN IMPORTANT BOOK ABOUT A FORGOTTEN HEALTH-CARE SYSTEM

Michael Whitfield is an eminent retired general practitioner and his book on the forgotten health services provided by the Dispensaries is timely and very readable. Why, you may ask, is a book on medical history timely in the 21st century when the Dispensaries ceased to exist in 1948? Precisely because the NHS does exist but is in trouble. In 1948 the hubris of the Welfare State swept away all the charitable services provided by the great and the good, nationalising the institutions that the State wished to take over and discarding those it did not want. Now, with problems besetting the NHS on all sides, we may regret such a move.

The Dispensaries started in London around 1700 but were closed in 1725 and did not really succeed there until the latter half of the eighteenth century. By this time the Methodists had started dispensaries in Bristol and many other dispensaries were also instigated around the country. Apothecaries often ran the dispensaries but they were more like health centres or small hospitals than a pharmacy although governmental plans for chemists to see patients in our present day NHS does sound a little like a return to a Dispensary system.



The funding was interesting. The great and the good were persuaded to subscribe to a local Dispensary and could then issue a letter to a poor patient who would otherwise not have the means to pay for medical attention. The person would then be treated at the Dispensary or even seen at home by the Apothecary. Sometimes this was completely free and in other circumstances a much reduced fee was asked of the patient.

Most important of all was the way in which the rich were being persuaded to pay for the health care of the poor.

This is, of course, an anathema to socialists....it is "the duty of the State to pay for health care". But when the rich, such as the bankers, have bankrupted the system a new way of taking money from them may have to be found.

So reading about the past does have a bearing on the present and may help us work out a solution for the future.

Well done Dr. Whitfield for writing this book.

P. R Goddard (December 2016)