

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

### MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL'S REPORT ON NOISE

TO THE EDITOR,

*The Journal of Laryngology and Otology.*

DEAR SIR,—Professor Bartlett's reply to my adverse criticism of the Medical Research Council's brochure on Noise fills me at once with admiration and with regret; admiration for its patient consideration of my points as well as for its frank assumption of responsibility; and regret that I have to reply to it, since the reply must be unfavourable.

On page one of the original brochure it is very properly acknowledged that in this kind of investigation "no generalisations from the experimental results in other and wider fields are possible". Unfortunately, and in preparation perhaps for a coming generalisation in the widest of all fields, this admirable caution is whittled away on the page two: "It therefore seems fair to say," we are told, "that if under fairly well controlled experimental conditions the effects of noise are not themselves very pronounced, the more striking effects that may appear under everyday conditions are due to a combination of factors, *and that noise itself ought not straightway to be made to bear any brunt* of the explanation of these striking effects" (italics mine). In other words, if no deleterious influences could be attributed to noise in the Cambridge experiments, in all probability none exist as a result of noise in the outside world.

Let us examine this claim.

We in medicine have long been troubled by the existence of an awkward gap in our organised war with disease, the gap, namely, between the Laboratory and Life. Here, in those psychological experiments, we are face to face with a similar hiatus. But the experimenters themselves do not seem to realise it.

It is to me incredible that Professor Bartlett and his associates can ever have been exposed to the overwhelming crash of the steam-hammer, the deafening din of boiler-making, or even the rattle of the common street-drill, and yet be able to feel satisfied that the experiments at Cambridge have a bearing upon the problem of industrial and street noise. To me the disparity seems ludicrous—or pathetic.

No more can I understand how, arguing from such experiences, it was possible to forget the caution we have just quoted and to commit to paper, to the Medical Research Council, and ultimately to the wide world, the astounding generalisation that the popular dislike of noise is little more than the "butt" of the grievance of a person who is "off colour", or "who fails to adapt himself to his social group", to quote the original pamphlet.

Regarding the influence of these remarkable conclusions upon what is undoubtedly an industrial and public evil, I was silent in my former communication, contenting myself merely with pointing out some of the oversights and fallacies of the methods adopted. But

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the apparent unconsciousness still manifested of the danger of retarding by such expressions a long overdue reform, leaves me now no alternative other than that of condemnation. For, as a direct result of the official publication and dissemination of those highly questionable opinions, men and women may now be expected to go on suffering discomfort and even pain of a nature and intensity apparently beyond the experience, and even, it would seem, beyond the imagining of the Cambridge psychological workers.

Having thus briefly touched upon the living problem behind this controversy, I now proceed to answer such of Professor Bartlett's pleadings as seem to me to be worthy of attention, and, as we proceed, it will be seen that the severe comments of my previous communication have certainly not undergone mitigation.

First of all, as an instance of the conditions approved by the chief investigator and of the kind of reporting to be found in the brochure, I drew attention to the absence of any allusion therein to the hearing of the subjects engaged in the exercises. In such absence I assumed that hearing tests had not been taken.

Professor Bartlett now seeks to make good the omission. As far as I can gather from what he says, he has no doubt himself that the hearing of the subjects was normal. That is his subjective impression. But, with all respect, let me say that in scientific research what is required is something rather more objective. The only approach made to definite information occurs in the statement in his letter that "practically all" had had their hearing tested. Now what exactly, precisely, and, in a word, scientifically, is the meaning of the phrase, "*practically all*"?

Thus, this point, the very first requirement in an investigation concerning audition, is even now still doubtful!

Secondly, we ask: Did the sounds employed in the exercises amount to what may properly be regarded as "noise"? Professor Bartlett decided not to employ the decibel scale, which, though not beyond criticism, does at least convey some sort of notion of the loudness of a sound. Consequently, when we ask for evidence that the sounds employed deserve the name of "noise", all Professor Bartlett can offer is another subjective impression.

As the matter stands, the "clicks" and gramophone records employed do not strike me, at least, as at all likely to disturb the flow of a Cambridge undergraduate's thought-current; not even when those records had been selected for their intellectual appeal.

Finally, to the charge that he employed exercises that were unsuitable, Professor Bartlett pleads guilty. In extenuation, he urges that it would not be easy to devise suitable exercises. That may or may not be the case. It does not really matter. What does matter is that, the difficulty not being surmounted, the investigation necessarily failed. At this point surely the failure should have been

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acknowledged and the whole undertaking abandoned. But this course was not adopted.

Nor was its omission perceived by the Medical Research Council.

Yours, etc.,

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## REVIEWS OF BOOKS

*The Philosophy of Sport.* By P. McBRIDE, M.D., F.R.C.P., Ed., F.R.S., Ed. London: Heath Cranton, Limited, Fleet Street, E.C.4. Price 7s. 6d.

“For the typical Briton there is only one form of pastime,—sport.” Such, anyhow, is the opinion of Dibelius, a well-known German writer. That this country has certainly been the cradle of most outdoor sports and games is shown by the way in which the terms required in describing them, or playing them, have been adopted into most of the languages of the world. This is demonstrated by the very title of a book by Rudolph Kircher, a German author, dealing most fully and sympathetically with British sport,—of which he shows great knowledge,—for it is entitled *Fairplay: Sport, Spiel und Geist in England*.

Any book dealing with the philosophy of sport must, therefore, be welcome. It is more so when written by a medical confrère, and it is trebly welcome to readers of this journal when it comes from the pen of such a distinguished colleague as Dr. Peter McBride. His younger colleagues may be reminded that our author was for many years the Lecturer on Oto-laryngology in the University of Edinburgh; that his text book on the subject long held a leading place in our literature; that he was the first president of the Section of Otology in the Royal Society of Medicine; that he was the first Semon Lecturer; and that he was a great worker, writer and teacher in our speciality. He retired from the profession (except for service during the War years) in 1910 and has had the good fortune to be free to develop his sporting tastes during the following twenty-two years. His qualifications for the discussion of most sports and games, enabling him to look at them from many angles, is modestly set out in the preface of his book. As a young boy he learned to ride and how to handle a gun. At school and at the university he played football, boxed, went in for a little rowing, and did almost daily work in the gymnasium. In his early days of medical practice he played golf and lawn tennis, with the addition of dumb bells. Later on he was able to devote one day a week to shooting, fishing or hunting. On the other days “imbued with the importance of keeping fit”,—as he writes,—he “found that boxing, fencing,