

Letter

U. S. Sanitary Commission,
New York Agency, 823 Broadway.

NEW YORK, March 11, 1863.

To Dr. QUACKENBUSH,

Surgeon General of the State of New York :

SIR,—The attention of the United States Sanitary Commission has just been called to a bill soon to be brought forward in the State Legislature, entitled “ An Act to provide additional means of relief for the sick and wounded soldiers of the State of New York in the United States service.”

Such a bill appeals so forcibly to the natural sympathies of our people, and to any, except the judgment of experts, presents such an aspect of humane interposition, to which no possible objections could occur, that we very much fear it may be hurried through the Legislature without due consideration. Persuaded that you, sir, must, from the nature of your office, already feel the objections to any such bill, we have thought it our duty to ask you to oppose it, and would endeavor to strengthen your hands by stating briefly why it does not recommend itself to those who, like ourselves, have had a long and large experience of the wants and solaces of sick and wounded soldiers.

1. The National Government is the National soldiers' *best friend*, doing for him, at all times and under all circumstances, a hundred times over all that any State government, or any benevolent association of any kind or description can do. This is due to the fact, that the United States Government has a great Medical Department, supported this year at an expense (including

salaries) of at least fifteen millions of dollars, which is co-extensive with the army, omnipresent, acting without reference to state troops, and therefore impartially, and in harmonious and co-efficient relations with all the other army departments. To maintain the National Medical Department in the highest state of efficiency; to honor its rules and regulations; to strengthen its discipline, and the public respect and confidence for it; to look to it for the care of all our sick and wounded men while under the control of the federal authorities—this, long experience has taught us, is the only thorough, humane and unexceptionable method of ministering to the health and restoration of our suffering troops.

No movements or schemes to succor our sick and wounded men, which are not national, which do not apply reform to the central source of relief, by improving the Medical Department of the United States Army itself—can be otherwise than illusive and superficial. Whatever has hitherto been effectually done to benefit the cause of the sick and wounded soldier, has been done, by increasing the force, improving the regulations, elevating the rank, or selecting more efficient presiding officers of the United States Medical Department. The vigilance of States should be directed almost exclusively to improving the general legislation of Congress in medical matters through their senators and representatives;—for as the New York soldier is, or may be everywhere—at New Orleans, Port Royal, Western Virginia, Vicksburgh, as well as near Washington—there is no chance or opportunity of taking care of him, except on some universal system which pervades the whole country—that is, not as a New York soldier at all, but only as a National soldier. You must, then, invigorate the National Medical Department and act through this, to be able to reach effectively your New York soldier—who must commonly fall sick in places far beyond any State reach. If the State of New York wishes to have *all* New York soldiers who

may fall sick, well taken care of, let her instruct her Senators to give their watchful and studious attention to whatever possible improvements, the general medical service of the army admits of. Nothing can secure any certain protection or care to the scattered and untraceable soldiers of this or any other State, except a general system, which contemplates and provides for the wants and perils of each and all our national troops. The slightest improvement at the centre is more efficacious than the largest at any given point of the circumference. Any general legislation at Washington for the improvement of the Medical Department, is a thousand fold more effective than the most costly legislation respecting the comfort of their own troops in the national service, which individual States may devise or consummate.

2. But, more than this, State legislation is usually—not intentionally—either in opposition to or in rivalry with National legislation in regard to medical matters.

Already, the great, beneficent, general system of the Government in its Medical Department has been constantly embarrassed by the well-meant efforts of benevolent associations, either representing States or communities, who have insisted on pursuing their humane work in their own way—confusing the regular system; disparaging and discrediting the responsible surgeons and nurses; exciting general suspicion of, and discontent with, their labors, and leaving the deluded public to imagine that voluntary associations, the Sanitary Commission, State societies, or local committees were the main reliance of the sick and wounded soldier. This is grossly unjust and mischievous. Three-quarters of all our sick are always beyond the reach and care of any State protection; and those who are not so, owe, and from the nature of the case must always owe, to the National Government itself, to its 3,000 responsible surgeons, and 15,000 hired nurses, and the regular national sup-

plies, ten times (we think a hundred times) more than to all external or extra-federal sources of benevolence whatsoever.

State legislation and State interposition for the benefit of its own soldiers, after they pass into Federal or National hands, is purely injurious. It may have a show of benevolence and humanity, but it cannot have the substance of it. Let the States look well to their troops before they pass into National control! You know, too well, Sir, as Surgeon-General of New York, how much might be done, and has been done, and remains to be done, in regard to the due selection of regimental surgeons, of inspection, of care of troops *in transitu*, and before being mustered in, to doubt where State care ought to be applied. And, after the New York soldier leaves the Federal wing, our State will have quite enough on her hands fitly to manifest her humane interest in his welfare. But any legislation which undertakes to look after him, as a New York soldier, while in the National army, is equally false in principle and ineffectual in practice. It emphasises a distinction which, on patriotic grounds, ought to be smothered; it holds out a hope which cannot be fulfilled; it confuses and embarrasses a national system which should be cleared and facilitated; it sets an example of interference which, generally followed by other States, would clog, obstruct, and shatter the great machinery of the National Medical Department, and disturb, to the universal loss and injury of all the sick and wounded, its beneficent and ever improving workings.

We do not propose to examine the particular features of the Bill, now threatening the welfare of the New York National Soldier. It is against the principle of it, and all similar Bills, that we protest. We do not see, however, that there is a single provision of the Bill which is not an attempt to do by State agents, what the National Government is either doing or is bound to do, and should and must be made to do by its own agents. The National Government is making provision at this very mo-

ment, to do for the New York Soldier, and every other Soldier, precisely what this Bill proposes—but could not do it if it were passed. It is arranging, and has already extensively arranged for the transportation, at Government rates, of Soldiers to the points nearest to their homes, which it is possible to reach in public conveyances. It is preparing special *through* cars—the first arrived yesterday in Jersey City, with forty-two sick—for the easy and safe carriage of the sick and wounded between Washington and New York—an advantage certain to accrue in a more than even proportion to the New York troops. Registers of all the sick and wounded already exist in the offices of the Medical Directors, or the U. S. Sanitary Commission. Inspection of all Hospitals is already systematically carried on by the new corps of Inspectors belonging to the Medical Department, but also a special kind by the U. S. Sanitary Commission—such as State agents could not properly be allowed to pursue; for with agents from each State ransacking each and every Hospital at their will, only hopeless confusion and injury to the soldier could ensue.

The Medical Department of the U. S. A., at the outset of the war, asked for and received the aid of a Commission, appointed by Government, to organize and represent the voluntary benevolence and supervisory care of the homes and hearts of the whole country; to act with the Medical Department as a supplementary body, adopting its rules and regulations, sustaining its discipline, eking out its inevitable defects, and pouring through its normal channels and machinery such extra supplies as the anxious affection and good will of the public insisted upon contributing, as an expression of sympathy and love for the sick soldier. Thus originated the U. S. Sanitary Commission. The peculiarity of it is, that it is just as national as the Medical Department itself; as universal and impartial; that it proceeds by the same rules and principles; is a helper and friend, not a critic and rival. Its aim has been, and is thoroughly known and acknowledged by the Medical Bureau to be, purely sup-

plementary, and in a spirit of entire subordination. Thus, it upholds its military discipline, supports all its rules and usages, sympathizes with and encourages the responsible authorities, aids the Medical Department in obtaining new facilities from Government, and in effecting beneficent universal reforms in its own general system. Thus sustained, the Medical Department has made prodigious strides in efficiency; it is now as well administered as any department of the army; it is steadily improving; it has the confidence of the civil medical profession; it is presided over by a man of consummate science, administrative ability, and high personal integrity—a humane and progressive man—Gen. Hammond, Surgeon-General of the U. S. A. This semi-official Board, the U. S. Sanitary Commission, is the sole channel through which any extra-governmental aid can be given to the sick and wounded soldier, without violating the order, the discipline, the efficiency of the Medical Department itself. It has already earned such a confidence from the Government, the Surgeons, and the Generals in the field; that, next to the Medical Department, it is their main reliance, and it is not too much to say, that it has twenty times the opportunities, facilities, and means of all other outside organizations combined, to aid the national soldier, whether in New Orleans, Murfreesboro, Newbern, or near Washington. Its medical Inspectors, select and educated experts, accompany every column of the army; its supplementary supplies go with every expedition; its relief agents are wherever the sick soldier falls or lies—on the battle-field, in the hospital, with the transport; its homes and lodges, under the charge of the auxiliaries, are at Cincinnati, Louisville, Cairo, Nashville, Washington and elsewhere. Thousands of soldiers sick, wounded, convalescent, discharged, weekly receive its shelter and its food; its safe-conduct, its transportation facilities, its aid in securing their pay and pensions. Its special Hospital inspection Corps, in which nearly a hundred of the most distinguished medical men in the country, from Wisconsin to Alabama are enrolled, are on ceaseless rounds of

rigid inspection of all hospitals, reporting to their chief, Dr. Clarke, at Washington, who reports directly to the Surgeon-General, himself, all existing defects, whether in the *personnel* or the general, condition of hospitals, east and west. It has a great consolidated registration system, by means of which, on inquiry made, the whereabouts and condition of any sick or wounded soldier known to any department of the government itself, can be discovered by his anxious kindred and friends. It collects money on the largest scale ever known to volunteer benevolence, and gathers supplies in an equal scale of vastness—solely owing to the self-recommending nature of its methods and principles. Seven hundred thousand dollars have flowed into its treasury—not including the money in the treasuries of its auxiliaries—and supplies (including those received by its auxiliaries) to the value of three or four millions must have passed through its hands. Every dollar, and every article is pledged to the watch, and care, and relief of the National soldier, and is impartially utilized for his benefit. Now, what State-plan, what local effort, can compete with so vast a National method and instrument as this? Why should State pride and local feeling be permitted to diminish its usefulness, by diverting any portion of the public sympathy or confidence from it; by encouraging other and obviously imperfect, partial, and competitive plans—not analogous with the government system, or the Medical Department, and not acceptable to them? Is there not danger of impairing the usefulness of this tried system—of weakening the public confidence in it, and thus seriously injuring the National soldier in his sick-bed, or on his bloody battle-field? Nothing but a profound practical conviction, derived from thorough acquaintance with the subject, after two years' intense devotion to it—that every State movement, whether legislative or through popular organizations, which strives to discriminate among and separate out for special aid and attention, the soldiers of individual States, is

a serious blow at the Government, the National Cause, the Medical Department, the responsible surgeons and nurses charged with the care of the sick, the National soldier himself, and finally, the very soldiers of the very State it is designed to bless—nothing but this solemn and well considered conviction, could embolden us to say so confidently and plainly what we have said in this letter, and what we earnestly commend to your intelligent and grave reflections, and through you to our State legislators. If it be suggested that we are speaking in the interest of the U. S. Sanitary Commission, let there be no doubt upon that point. We are so. But that Commission has no interest, except that of the Government, the Cause, and the National soldier—each and every one. It knows that whatever weakens its hands, weakens the Medical Department, the Government and the Cause, and injures the National soldier, whether sick or well. It claims the right to assert its disinterestedness in these statements, and flings itself boldly upon the character of its conductors, its allies, friends and supporters, for whatever weight these arguments may want beyond their own self-evident truth.

Very respectfully yours,

HENRY W. BELLOWS, Chairman.

W. H. VAN BUREN, M. D.,

WOLCOTT GIBBS, M. D.,

C. E. AGNEW, M. D.,

GEORGE T. STRONG,

F. L. OLMSTED,

Executive Committee U. S. Sanitary Commission.