

Correspondence respecting Fees charged for issuing Bills of Health.

*Presented to the Legislative Council by Command of
His Excellency the Governor.*

(1.)

Governor Sir G. F. Bowen, G.C.M.G. to the Secretary of State.

No. 36.

GOVERNMENT HOUSE,
HONGKONG, 23rd January, 1885.

MY LORD,

I have the honour to lay before your Lordship the following circumstances connected with the issue of Bills of Health at this Port.

2. It appears that at many ports the production of Bills of Health is insisted on in the case of all vessels coming from Hongkong. These Bills of Health have for many years been granted by the Colonial Surgeon and the Health Officer on payment of a private fee varying from five (\$5) to ten (\$10) dollars for each Bill of Health issued. No return, however, was made of these fees, and this Government was not aware of the practice of receiving them until quite recently. During the enforcement of Quarantine Regulations in this Colony last year, the attention of the owners and agents of ships was called to the subject, and representations were made by them to the Chamber of Commerce, which addressed my Government as follows:—

“It has come to the knowledge of the Committee that the practice has prevailed in this Colony for some time past of charging for Bills of Health on a varying scale from five (\$5) to ten (\$10) dollars, the variance presumably being made on account of the difference in tonnage of Steamers, or length of voyage, or for some other reason. * * * According to the Schedule published by the Government, the Committee is unable to see where the charge for Bills of Health is recognized by the Government. No doubt these fees are collected by the Government Officials or their subordinates in virtue of their public office held under the Government, and the Committee would be glad to know whether the Government recognizes these charges, and the varying scale on which some of them are based, as the Committee has been unable satisfactorily to ascertain this from any record or returns made of fees so collected, and their application by the Government.”

3. I caused a copy of this communication from the Chamber of Commerce to be forwarded to the Colonial Surgeon (Dr. AYRES), who was requested to furnish explanations. In reply a report was received from him, in which he stated that the right of the Health Officer and himself to receive fees for the issue of Bills of Health belongs to them in their capacity as private medical practitioners.

See enclosed Letter from Chamber of
Commerce, January 19th, 1885.

4. As it appeared, however, that the Bills of Health issued bore the Royal Arms, were stamped with an official seal, and were signed by the two Officers in their official capacity, I called for a return of the fees received during the year 1883. This return showed that the fees collected by the Colonial Surgeon during that period amounted to only two hundred and forty dollars (\$240), (about £48), whereas those received by the Health Officer amounted to the large sum of two thousand nine hundred and eighty dollars (\$2,980), (about £596), or more than his Official salary, viz., two thousand dollars per annum (\$2,000), (about £400).

5. Since this return was furnished, the use of the Royal Arms and other Official attestations has been discontinued, and the Colonial Surgeon and Health Officer claim that, as any duly qualified medical practitioner can grant Bills of Health, they are in a position exactly similar to that of any other practitioner in the Colony. However, there can be little doubt that the Official status of these two Officers has enabled them to have the monopoly of these fees, for it is alleged that the authorities at the different ports at which vessels call on their homeward voyage from this Colony would not so readily accept Bills of Health not signed by medical practitioners of recognized Official standing.

6. This question was brought before the Executive Council, when the following resolution was agreed to unanimously:—

“The Council advise that a letter should be addressed to the Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce, stating that the important question of the fees charged for issuing Bills of Health has been fully considered by the Governor in Council, who is of opinion that these Bills should be issued free with the exception of a small charge to cover the Government expenses of printing, &c. But as vested interests appear to have grown up, it is advised that the whole question should be referred to the Secretary of State for his decision.”

7. I am unwilling without your Lordship's instructions to interfere with what may be now considered the vested interests of the Colonial Surgeon and the Health Officer, the fees for Bills of Health having been collected in the same manner as now during the tenure of office of their predecessors. But as the cost of Bills of Health constitutes a serious tax on shipping, I would strongly recommend that, as soon as a proper arrangement can be made to that effect, the Health Officer of this Port should issue Bills of Health at a nominal charge, and should pay the fees into the Colonial Treasury.

8. In the case of the Colonial Surgeon, who, as has been shown, collects only a small amount each year in the way of fees for granting Bills of Health, it would not be difficult to deal with the matter at once; but, in the case of the Health Officer, owing to the large amount of fees annually received by him, an arrangement could not be so easily made. Adequate compensation to the Health Officer would be too heavy a tax on the present revenue of the Colony.

9. Under these circumstances, I have felt it to be my duty to bring the facts of the case to your notice, and to solicit instructions as to the manner in which your Lordship desires that this matter should be dealt with in future.

I have, &c.,

(Signed), G. F. BOWEN.

The Right Honourable

THE EARL OF DERBY, K.G.,

&c.,

&c.,

&c.

Enclosure.

The Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce to the Colonial Secretary.

HONGKONG GENERAL CHAMBER OF COMMERCE,
HONGKONG, 19th January, 1885.

SIR,

In reply to your letter of the 14th instant, requesting us to state what are the Ports which insist on a Bill of Health being produced from Hongkong, I have the honour to state, for the information of His Excellency the Governor, that Bills of Health from Hongkong are required by the following Ports, viz.:—

1. Manila, which at all times insists on the production of a Bill of Health from Hongkong.
2. All Spanish Ports, speaking generally, require a Bill of Health from this Port.
3. San Francisco and all United States' Ports likewise insist at all times on Bills of Health from Hongkong.
4. All Australian Ports.
5. Mauritius. Capetown also would insist on a Bill of Health from Hongkong in the case of a steamer arriving direct from Hongkong without having called at and obtained a Bill of Health from Mauritius, but in the case of a steamer having called at Mauritius *en route* for Capetown, the latter Port is then satisfied with a Bill of Health from Mauritius alone.
6. All vessels proceeding to Europe *via* the Suez Canal must also be provided with Bills of Health from this Port, in order to avoid "Quarantine," which would otherwise be enforced by Egypt.

I would also state, for the information of His Excellency the Governor, that during the period of enforcement of the Quarantine Regulations here, the production of a Bill of Health from every Port within ten days' sail of this Colony was insisted upon by the Health Officer of Hongkong.

I have, &c.,

(Signed), W. KESWICK,
Chairman.

The Honourable W. H. MARSH, C.M.G.,
Colonial Secretary.

(2.)

The Secretary of State to Governor Sir G. F. Bowen, G.C.M.G.

DOWNING STREET,
20th March, 1885.

No. 67.

SIR,

I have received your despatch, No. 36, of the 23rd of January, relative to the fees charged for issuing Bills of Health to vessels leaving Hongkong.

2. I approve the action which you have taken in this matter, and the course which you propose to adopt in future. I have given my careful consideration to the question as to how the special cases of Dr. ADAMS and Dr. AYRES should be dealt with, on which you request my instructions.

3. I do not feel, however, that this is a question upon which, with the information before me, I am in a position to form any definite opinion; but I shall be prepared to sanction the grant of such a personal allowance to Dr. ADAMS as the Legislative Council may recommend, bearing in mind that, since it cannot be doubted that the number of fees which he received would have been much less had he not improperly given an official character to the Bills of Health issued by him, his compensation allowance should be calculated rather upon what his fees might have amounted to had the Bills of Health which he issued been of a purely un-official character.—With regard to Dr. AYRES, I presume that this circumstance would not have affected his fees to the same proportionate extent.

3. I need not add that any such allowances should be personal to Dr. ADAMS and Dr. AYRES, and should not be continued to their successors.

I have, &c.,

(Signed), DERBY.

Governor

SIR G. F. BOWEN, G.C.M.G.,

&c.,

&c.,

&c.