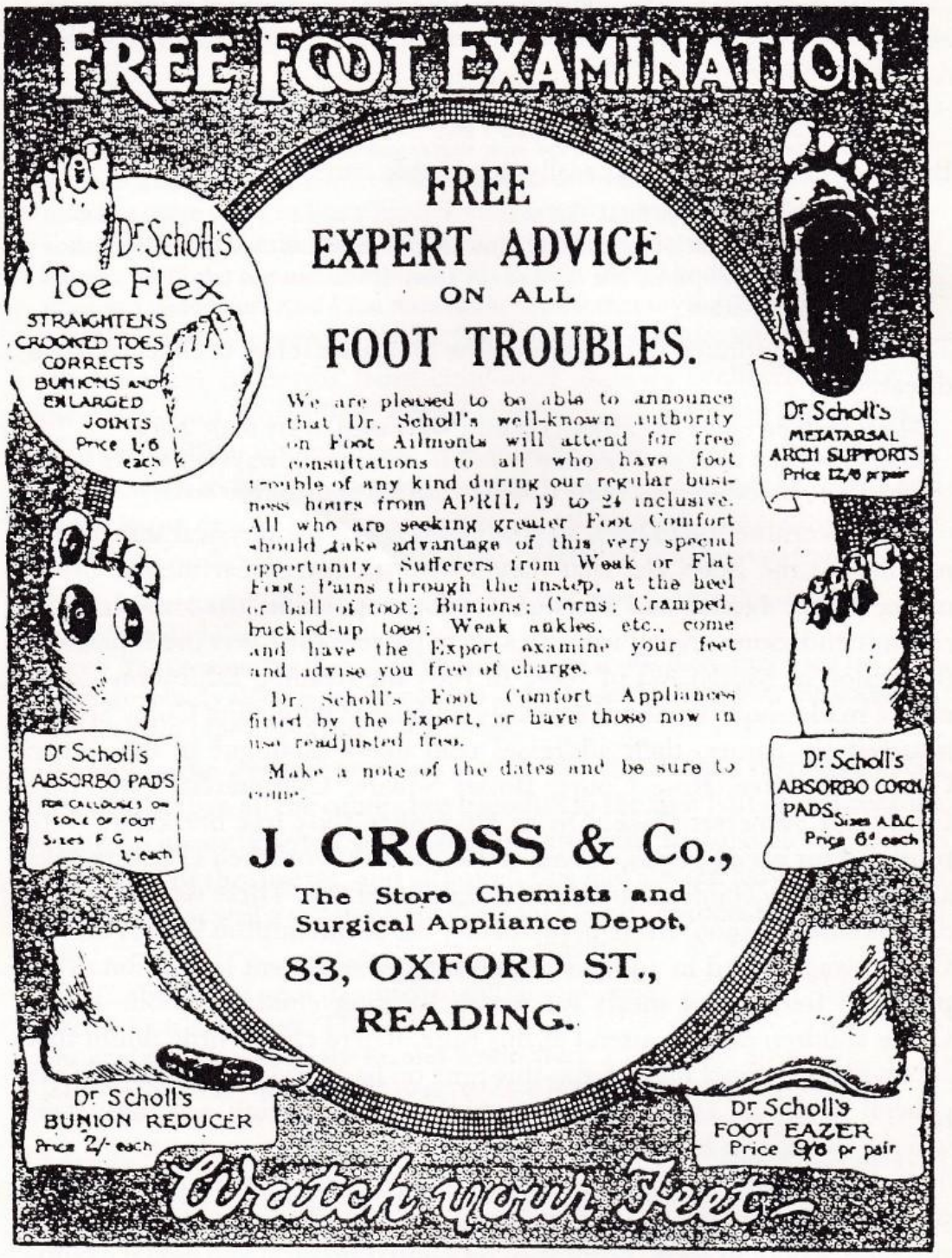

Advertisement from Berkshire Chronicle (1920).

Their dependants were not, however, entitled to go up 'before the panel' and for those who could manage it, money was paid into some sort of sick club or health insurance scheme.

Mr F. My Mum used to pay a penny a week into the Royal Berkshire Hospital Scheme and you could be an inmate and have an operation for that.

The People's Dispensary ran a similar scheme for medicines, although the poorest could get them free.

Mrs C And there was a dispensary then that run from the back of Heelas.
Mrs N Oh that's right, yes, we used to go and collect medicine from there.
Mrs C They used to find out, you know, how you were sort of managing . . . if you had free meals and that, you usually got free medicines. But Mums and Dads had to sign the paper and the oldest one had to go and fetch it round the dispensary.

Otherwise medical charges could be ruinous:

Mrs R My Dad, in the war, he was in the Fleet Air Arm and one of the ships he was on they had smallpox on board . . . Everybody had to be cabled . . . 'Make sure your families vaccinated against smallpox.' My mum didn't like doctors and I was such a bad-tempered baby . . . so she didn't have it done. So when my Dad came home he went mad . . . (he) got in touch with the (doctor) and he came out and vaccinated me and my Mum. My Dad got a fiver out of his pocket and said to him 'How much is that?' and he said 'That'll do nicely', and put it in his pocket.

Unsurprisingly many people would rely on their own cures for ailments or that of local experts, such as one man in Brook Street:

Mrs R He belonged to the Red Cross. He used to do things and my Mum said she can remember having an enormous great boil, I think it was on her arm. . . She said 'I can remember him lancing my boil' . . . It was the first time she nearly fainted and it was the only thing.

The home-made cures ranged from the mildly pleasant, liquorice, boiled onions, syrup of figs, to the frankly disgusting, goose-grease, brimstone and treacle, castor oil and camphorated oil, sulphur tablets and Russian Tallow.

Mrs M When you had a cold when we was kids, our mother used to cut out a brown heart out of paper and put tallow on it, tallow candle, and put it all over that and stuck that on your chest and you had that on for two or three days. And it used to do your chest good.

Or,

If you had a sore throat, somebody's sweaty sock, you put that round your neck when you went to bed.

It would be wrong to give the impression that the population of Coley was completely sickly and disease-ridden. Undoubtedly, the poorest children were under-nourished in the first few decades, but by 1925

It would be wrong to give the impression that the population of Coley was completely sickly and disease-ridden . . . many people couldn't remember having a day's illness in their lives. Mr and Mrs Salt (c. 1910).

attendances at the Southampton Street Feeding Centre had dropped to eight. Many infants and children died, but also many people couldn't remember having a day's illness in their lives. The children for the most part seem to have led a hardy, outdoor life with basic, nourishing food. Coley School won boxing, football and swimming trophies year after year in the twenties and thirties. There is no doubt that standards of health improved dramatically at this time. More than two-thirds of conscripts in the First World War were unfit for duty, less than one-third were by the Second. Infant mortality dropped from 142 per 1000 to 31.2 by 1950. There can be little doubt that the nationwide slum clearances of the twenties and thirties, of which the clearances in Coley were a small part, were a major factor in reducing the risks of infection and disease amongst the poorest. Diseases such as diphtheria and tuberculosis went into decline years before the inoculations were developed. Later, other factors helped to improve the nation's health. Perhaps ironically the very rationing of the Second World War improved the diet of the poor, ensuring a good balance of proteins and vitamins at low prices. The National Health Service Act of 1946, providing free health care 'from the cradle to the grave' did a great deal to ensure that one did not come quite so soon after

A typical hearse of the period (c. 1900).

the other. For women, improved access to family planning techniques ensured fewer pregnancies and the NHS took better care of both mother and baby.

This small revolution was reflected in Coley, where funerals became less of a common sight; sawdust strewn on the road to muffle noises outside the houses of the sick, a thing of the past. Mrs R's brother died of bronchial pneumonia, aged six weeks, after the Second World War. A wreath was collected for, and 153 people signed the sheet of paper in the local shop. Compared to the breech birth at the beginning of this chapter 'it was quite a rare thing and it touched everyone'.

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