

SMITH

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A Discourse

on the Public Duties of Medical Men


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DISCOURSE

ON THE

PUBLIC DUTIES OF MEDICAL MEN,



A

DISCOURSE

ON THE

PUBLIC DUTIES OF MEDICAL MEN,

DELIVERED AS AN

INTRODUCTORY LECTURE

AT THE

COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS AND SURGEONS

IN THE CITY OF NEW-YORK,

November 2d, 1846.

BY JOSEPH MATHER SMITH, M. D.

Professor of the Theory and Practice of Physic, and Clinical Medicine.

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DISCOURSE.

GENTLEMEN :

THE study of medicine, next to that of Divinity, if rightly directed and applied to its appropriate objects, is, of all intellectual pursuits, the most widely contributive to human happiness. It embraces in its scope not only the structure, and laws which govern the economy of organized beings, and particularly that of man, but also the history and properties of the agents which are operative in producing disease, and in restoring and preserving health. Comprehending, in a word, the phenomena of life, and whatever tends to affect the mind and body, the science of medicine may be said to extend over a wider field of inquiry than any other department of human knowledge.

With this view of medical science, the elements of which form the subjects of the several courses of lectures delivered in this branch of our State University, allow me to lead your minds to the contemplation of some of the duties which will necessarily devolve upon those who make the practice of Physic the pursuit of their lives. In doing this, I am influenced by the conviction that nothing can afford to the ingenuous student a stronger incentive to industry, than a plain exhibition of the high responsibilities the physician assumes, in entering on the practice of his profession.

The duties of the physician may be properly divided into public and private. The latter, which relate to the immediate attendance on the sick, and the alleviation and removal of individual suffering, have so frequently been the theme of discourse in books and popular lectures, that I shall not detain you by attempting to repeat them. The former are, for the most part, of a different kind:—they concern the general health and happiness of the community at large; and it is in the performance of them, that the character, talents, and acquirements of the physician, are, in a degree, exposed to the observation and scrutiny of the world. The nature of these public duties, and the qualifications necessary to discharge them satisfactorily, will afford, it is believed, a subject sufficiently interesting to engage your attention on the present occasion.

No physician can be qualified to perform the various duties imposed on him by the public authorities, without an extensive and particular knowledge of the several departments of medical science; for it is the possession of such knowledge only, that can secure to him the confidence of the public, and sustain the true dignity of the profession.

Of the many subjects, an acquaintance with which is indispensable in him, who undertakes to aid in the deliberations of legislative bodies, respecting the public health, there are none more important than the causes of disease, and the means of obviating and counteracting their effects. To enable one to speak with decision and authority on such subjects, it is necessary to be conversant with the varieties of climate and soil, the situation and topography of countries, the occupations, diet, and habits and manners of the people. The influence of these severally, are every where known to be powerfully operative on the human constitution; and their united agency is deemed, by every sound

philosopher, to have been sufficiently energetic to produce all the varieties of color, and configuration of body, which are observed among the different races of men.

The immediate and diversified effects of climate are interesting to every class of persons; but to none is the study of its multifarious relations so important as to the student of medical science. Its direct influence in producing and modifying diseases, and, its subsidiary effect, in giving energy to causes which otherwise would be inactive, should be subjects of special inquiry with every one who wishes to attain that knowledge, which will qualify him to discharge his public duties, and elevate him in the scale of professional reputation. The glory of Hippocrates was derived not more from his sagacity as a pathological observer, than from his knowledge of the character of diseases, as affected by the influences of air, water, and localities.

But let us take a more particular view of the services which the physician may be called to render to the community.

Among the subjects on which his opinion may be required, are the qualities of the waters used in diet and for other purposes; the properties and effects of certain articles of food; and the best mode of preserving the health and lives of persons employed in certain manufacturing and other occupations. His opinion may also be demanded with regard to the location, plan, economical arrangement, and dietaries of hospitals, alms-houses, prisons, and seminaries of learning. To be enabled to advise on these various subjects, it is necessary to have a knowledge of the principles of hygiene, and to be informed with regard to the effects of the various systems of management pursued in the manufacturing, humane, criminal, and literary institutions of different countries.

But it is in relation to matters connected with the origin, diffusion, and prophylactics of pestilential diseases, that the physician is required to discharge duties of a higher and more responsible character.

Few cities in maritime situations, and, indeed, few of any magnitude in the interior of countries, are exempt from the occasional ravages of pestilential epidemics. The frightful aspect of these diseases, and the fury with which they frequently commence and pursue their career of desolation, have, from the earliest ages, given them the first rank in the list of human calamities.

In such seasons, when the popular mind is alarmed and turned from its ordinary occupations, the responsibilities of the physician occasion anxieties of extreme intensity; for, on him then devolves, not merely the duty of announcing the appearance of the disease, but of watching and reporting its progressive extension, and of studying its origin, nature, peculiarities and treatment.

To enable you to form a just idea of the circumstances, in which he is required to perform such important services, it will not be improper to cite a few examples of the terrible fatality of pestilential epidemics, and of the depressing moral effects they produce on the community in which they prevail. During the plague of London, in 1665, the deaths were numbered at upwards of 68,000. In 1709, the same disease prevailed in Dantzic, and destroyed about 25,000 of its inhabitants. In the following year 30,000 perished by it, in the city of Stockholm. In 1719, it ravaged Aleppo, destroying in a short period 30,000 persons. Numerous instances of epidemic plague, equally devastating, might be adduced; but it is deemed sufficient to add one or two examples illustrative of the mortality of yellow fever, or that form of pestilence which has so frequently, within the last

hundred years, visited the principal Atlantic cities of the United States, and some of the larger sea-port towns of southern Europe. Sir Gilbert Blane well remarks that, "in respect to mortality, this epidemic takes precedence even of the plague; for, in a population of 16,000, civil and military in Gibraltar in 1804, there perished 6,000; a proportion considerably above that of the pestilence of the Levant. In our own country, this disease has been scarcely less malignant and fatal. Nearly 4,000 died of it in Philadelphia in 1793; and its prevalence in this city, and in other American cities in 1795, and in subsequent years, affords similar evidence of its extraordinary rate of mortality.

As the plague and certain other malignant distempers, of former ages, have left enduring memorials of their destructive energy, so will the epidemic cholera leave indelible traces of its ravages in the present century. Commencing its devastations in 1817, in the Delta of the Ganges, this fell disease has over-run many of the most populous cities and regions of the old and new world, destroying millions of our race.

To complete the view of the terrific character of malignant epidemic visitations, let us contemplate their influence on the moral feelings. There are perhaps no circumstances which more powerfully affect the popular mind than those of pestilence. The intellectual energies are paralyzed; the depressing passions are awakened; and the common vocations of men are abandoned, or pursued with diminished alacrity. The history of epidemics furnishes many illustrations of these remarks. Thucydides, in his admirable account of the pestilence which ravaged Athens, during the invasion of Attica by the Peloponnesians and their allies, says, to use the words of his translator Dr. Clifton,

“that the most terrible circumstance of all was the depression of mind in those, that found themselves beginning to be ill ; for, growing immediately desperate, they gave themselves over, without making any resistance.” After describing the horrible mortality in the city generally, he remarks, that “the temples, where they dwelt in tents, were also full of the dead that died there ; for, oppressed to the last extremity by the violence of the distemper, and not knowing what course to take, men grew equally careless about holy and profane things. So deeply impressed were the Athenians with the idea that certain destruction awaited them, that they yielded themselves up to desperation, and finally to every licentious excess.” “As to laborious works” says, Thucydides, “no man was forward to undertake anything noble or laudable, not knowing whether they should live to finish it ; but, what any man knew to be delightful and every way conducing to pleasure, that was made both honorable and profitable ; neither the fear of the gods, nor the laws of men restrained any. For, with respect to the one, they concluded from what they saw, that it was all the same, whether they worshipped, or not worshipped, all men dying without distinction ; and with respect to the other, no man expected that his life would last till the law could punish him for his misdemeanor.”

To a similar state of grief and despair were the people of London reduced by the plague, to which I have alluded. Dr. Hodges tells us that the consternation was inexpressible, “The whole British nation wept for the miseries of her metropolis.” After narrating in detail the desolating progress of the disease, he emphatically exclaims,

—————Quis talia fando
Temperet a lachrymis ?

The gloom and despondency which take possession of the

mind in seasons of pestilence, give a new aspect to everything connected with the present and future. Dr. Rush, in his narrative of the state of his mind during the yellow fever in 1793, says, "My perception of time was new to me. It was uncommonly slow. The ordinary business and pursuits of men appeared to me in a light that was equally new. The hearse and the grave mingled themselves with every view I took of human affairs."

Such is a feeble description of the calamities of pestilence, the moral and physical phenomena of which are extremely interesting to every reflecting mind.

Now, it is in the midst of such scenes, that the physician is expected to act with intelligence and deliberation. Though breathing, in common with his fellow-citizens, a pestilential atmosphere, and especially so in his visits to the crowded hovels of poverty and filth, no fears or anxieties should be allowed to disturb his equanimity or embarrass his judgment. His is then emphatically the post of danger, as it is of duty and of honor. The public have a right to claim his services; and hence it is important that he be qualified to render them with advantage to the community, and with credit to himself and his profession. Thucydides, in his history of the Athenian pestilence, called upon every physician to declare the origin of the distemper. During the plague of London in 1665, the king "commanded the College of Physicians jointly to write somewhat in *English*," says Dr. Hodges, "that might be a general directory in this calamitous exigence."

But in no pestilential period has recourse to our profession been more universal than during the wide-spread desolations of the epidemic cholera. Wherever, in Europe, the disease appeared, or threatened invasion, the municipal authorities consulted learned physicians and medical

associations; and, for the most part, adopted the methods suggested by them for averting or arresting its prevalence. On its appearance in this city, in 1832, a medical council was organized, at the head of which was placed the eminent physician and surgeon, who now presides over this college; and whose learning and practical wisdom are directed to the promotion of its highest interests.*

But how, it may be inquired, is the student to qualify himself to serve the public under such trying circumstances? To this, it may be answered, that it is by investigating the history and phenomena of epidemics. It is true, the essential nature of the causes of pestilence is involved in mystery; and the laws which govern the operation of those causes are not fully ascertained. Still, the circumstances in which many of them originate, and the mode in which their agency is extended epidemically, are sufficiently well understood to enable us to form correct opinions with respect to their general attributes.

It is well known that few medical subjects have been more fertile of controversy than the origin and mode of propagation of pestilential fevers. The grand question respecting the contagiousness or non-contagiousness of these fevers, though settled for the most part, on this side of the Atlantic, is still agitated among the physicians of Europe. As every measure designed to prevent or diminish the evils of epidemics is based on the opinions formed concerning the nature of their causes, and their mode of extension, it may readily be conceived how important it is to understand the merits of that controversy, in order to arrive at satisfactory conclusions. Error on this subject is to be deprecated not merely on account of its retarding the

* Alexander H. Stevens, M.D.

progress of science, but for a more important reason. It leads to the adoption of a system of measures which may be oppressive and inefficient in its operations.

If the spread of pestilential fevers depend upon a contagion transmitted from one individual to another, and capable of being transported from place to place, it is obvious that the means of checking their diffusion should be founded upon principles corresponding with the laws, which are known to govern the extension of disorders confessedly contagious. But if they originate from a poison, generated from materials existing within the precincts of cities, and totally disconnected from the living human body, a poison incommunicable from one person to another, but diffused through the common atmosphere and endangering all who breathe it, it is equally plain that a very different system of means is required to stay their prevalence and prevent their recurrence.

The theory of the contagious nature of plague and yellow fever is so widely different from the doctrine of the local and miasmatic origin of those diseases, that no regulations, deduced exclusively from the one theory, can be adapted to that of the other; nor can there be any consistency in a system of medical police which is designed to meet both views of the subject.

When the Venetian Government in 1423, appointed officers to guard against the introduction of the plague, an appointment from which originated lazarettoes and quarantines, there was but one opinion respecting the cause of the disease; and consequently no other preventive measures were thought of, but those intended to exclude its reputed contagion. From that period to the present day, the same principles of medical police have, for the most part, prevailed in regard to that disease in the different countries of

Europe; and have been implicitly adopted in this country, in relation to the yellow fever. The correctness of those principles were long since called in question by many respectable medical observers; but the fears and prejudices of mankind have hitherto allowed no facts, however well established, and no arguments, however conclusive, to induce them so to alter the regulations of quarantine, as to make them harmonize with the doctrine of the endemic or miasmatic origin of malignant fevers.

There is a sentiment in the human mind, that strongly resists innovations in institutions which have long been established; and its influence is seen to operate with most energy in cases in which the proposed innovations are founded on principles diametrically opposed to opinions, which have received the approbation of ages. Even the simplest improvements which science offers to the arts, are, for the same reason, often tardily adopted. Since the revival of letters, great and important improvements have been made in the science of medicine; improvements, which have not required the sanction of the municipal authorities, or alteration of legislative enactments to enable the public to enjoy the benefits resulting from them. Had such sanctions and emendations of law been necessary, before the world could have experienced the advantage of those improvements, it is doubtful if medicine would yet have emerged from the darkness of the fourteenth century. Now, in common with every other department of medical science, the etiology of pestilential fevers has, since the institution of quarantine, received large accessions of truth; but it unfortunately happens that they are, in a great measure, practically useless, in consequence of the public authorities refusing to adopt the system of police and hygiene, which they naturally suggest.

The only apology which can be offered in justification of legislative bodies declining to alter the laws relating to pestilential diseases, and particularly to quarantine, so as to make them consistent with our improved knowledge of the causes of those diseases, is the want of unanimity among medical men. If appeals, however, were made to those only, whose learning and opportunities for observation have enabled them to trace the causes of malignant fevers to their true sources, it is believed, there would not be found sufficient discrepancy of opinion among them, to occasion any embarrassment in arriving at just and satisfactory conclusions on the subject.

From these observations, an opinion may be formed of the nature of the subjects, an acquaintance with which is necessary, before the physician can be qualified to discharge the implied obligation he takes upon himself to serve the public, by pointing out the means of removing or preventing the calamities of malignant epidemics. In investigating these subjects no pre-conceived opinions or idolatrous attachment to medical authorities should be allowed to influence his inquiries. A rigid adherence to facts, and a strict observance of the rules of induction, cannot fail to lead him to correct conclusions. When truth has been thus attained, it is his imperative duty to urge it upon the attention of legislators, in order that the health laws may be founded upon correct principles. Were the regulations of quarantine so founded, the vexatious inconveniences, to which the crews and passengers in ships recently arrived, are, in many instances, subjected in this country and in Europe, to say nothing of the detention of ships and their cargoes, in certain cases, would not be experienced. The interests of voyagers and the concerns of commerce, every

where, with perhaps a few exceptions, demand a reform of the systems of quarantine*

But further; as it is the province of the physician to enlighten the public on the subject of the sources of pestilential diseases; so it is, also, his duty to indicate other general causes of disease, and to urge the adoption of means for their correction. Among the causes referred to, there is none more injurious to health than the use of intoxicating liquors. Indeed, the amount of disease, poverty, immorality and crime, produced by intemperance, vastly exceeds that resulting from all other sources of physical suffering, depravity and guilt. It was remarked, nearly two centuries ago, by Lord Chief Justice Hale, that if the great enormities, which had come under his judication in the course of twenty years, "were divided into five parts, four of them

* The great movement recently made in Europe, with a view to amend the existing quarantine laws, there is reason to hope, will result in the adoption of such modifications of them, as will make them accord with the present state of our knowledge respecting the etiology of the plague. "In 1838, a proposal was made by the French to the British Government to promote the formation of a congress of delegates from the various European States having ports in the Mediterranean, for the purpose of agreeing upon some uniform system of quarantine regulations, to be adopted by and binding upon all." For much new and valuable information on this subject, reference may be had to "the Correspondence respecting the Quarantine Laws, &c, presented to Parliament, 1846;" and especially to the "Rapport à l'Académie Royale de Médecine sur la Peste, et les Quarantaines, fait, au nom d'une commission, par M. le Dr. Prus, &c., 1846." Analyses of these documents are given in the *Med. Chirg. Review*, No. 106. Recently, also, the quarantine laws in this country have attracted attention. Able discussions of the subject are published in the "Report of the special committee of the House of Assembly of the State of New-York, on the present Quarantine Laws, 1846;" and in the twentieth number of the *New-York Journal of Medicine and the Collateral Sciences*, edited by Charles A. Lee, M.D.

would be found to be issues and products of excessive drinking, or of tavern and ale-house meetings."

Recognizing it as an obligation incumbent upon him, as a physician and guardian of the public health, Dr. Rush, years ago, widely proclaimed the mischiefs and extent of this prevailing vice of our nation. But it is only of late that the philanthropic of our whole country have been awakened to a sense of its destructive consequences. It has been remarked by a medical professor in a neighboring State University, in speaking of the numerous victims of intemperance, that "well may war, pestilence and famine drop for an instant their weapons of destruction, and look on with astonishment and envious admiration, to behold their own havoc so far outdone."

The magnitude of the evil in question, demands that every medical man should gird himself to the work of promoting the temperance reform which is now going onward in the world; and which the late lamented President of this College, Dr. Watts, pronounced the greatest moral enterprise of the age.

But the public duties of physicians are not limited to the objects, which have been mentioned. His services are required in the armies and navy of his country. In these, he takes an honorable rank, corresponding with the responsibilities which devolve upon him.

Without health, no soldiery can be effective: and hence its preservation is of the first importance to the state. The strength of armies is often prostrated by disease; and to this cause is not unfrequently attributed the miscarriage of military enterprises. It is well ascertained that more troops perish by disease than fall by the sword; a fact deeply interesting to every nation engaged in war.

The diseases, from which soldiers most frequently suffer,

in summer and autumn, are fever and dysentery. Numerous examples illustrative of the great extent to which these maladies prevail in armies, are recorded in the memoirs of military medicine. We are told by Sir James McGrigor, that in the peninsular army, there were admitted into the British Hospitals, "during the years 1812-'13, and part of 1814, 68,894 cases of fever, of which 6,703 died, equal to 9.7 per cent.; and during the same period there were admitted into the regimental hospitals 7,526 cases of dysentery, of which 4,717 died, or 62.5 per cent." It is said that we ought not, during a campaign, to calculate upon less than ten sick, to every one hundred fighting men. According to M. Vaidy's estimate "an army of one hundred thousand men may expect to have ten thousand sick during a campaign, independent of any rencontre with the enemy; of which number five or six thousand may be medical and the rest surgical cases; but after a battle the proportion will be reversed, and under the most favorable circumstances, he calculates upon ten thousand or twelve thousand wounded in addition to the above." The number of sick and wounded among the American troops in the present Mexican campaign, there is reason to believe, will be found to confirm the correctness of the general statistical calculations of Vaidy. Exposed as soldiers are to the vicissitudes of the weather, and to the influence of climates, rendered unhealthy by the extremes of atmospheric intemperature, and noxious exhalations from the earth, their lives are constantly endangered, and their constitutions, however robust, often deeply impaired by privations, fatigues and irregularity of habits.

It is to be noticed, however, that the health of an army is often remarkably influenced by the morale of the troops, a series of disasters depressing the mind, and thus favoring

the action of morbid agents; and, on the other hand, a succession of victories producing mental phenomena which fortify the system against the assaults of disease. The latter fact is strikingly illustrated in the circumstance that "after the battle of Austerlitz the French army, cantoned in Bavaria, had only 100 sick in a division of 8,000 men."

To those intrusted with the health of soldiers, a knowledge of military hygiene and medical topography, in all their details, is indispensable. The circumstances of armies, in active service, are ever varying; and consequently everything relating to the peculiar endemic influences of different localities, and to the qualities of the articles used in diet, should be well understood by the medical officers. The discipline and means of preserving the health of men in the field are usually different from those which are proper when they are in garrison. In the former situation, they are subjected to the action of causes, which often vary in their nature or mode of action, with every change in the position of an army. In the latter, the causes of disease are more uniform; and when ascertained, admit of the application of a uniform system of measures for their correction. In every situation the medical officers, if properly qualified for their stations, may render important services to their companions in arms.

The preservation of the lives and health of soldiers has been esteemed an object of so much consequence as to induce some governments to institute seminaries for educating army surgeons. As examples of this kind, may be mentioned those founded many years since at Vienna and Paus. The former was called the Josephine Academy; and was "under the direction of the minister of war, out of whose treasury, the salaries of the professors, and all other

expenses were defrayed." The latter was established in 1794, the French Republic finding it necessary to have medical officers, specially prepared to serve in the navy and military hospitals.* The advantages of such institutions, and of professorships for teaching military hygiene and medicine in general medical schools, in countries where there are large standing armies, and particularly in times of war, cannot be doubted. If governments require the services of medical men in their military establishments, it is proper they should provide the means for educating them.

The value of the services of army physicians and surgeons has been highly estimated from the earliest ages of classic antiquity. Homer, in his *Iliad*, mentions in the strongest terms of commendation the medical aid afforded to the Greeks, by Podalirius and Machaon, at the siege of Troy. When the latter had been wounded by Paris, he represents Greece as trembling for her physician. In his disabled state, at the command of Idomeneus, he is transported with dispatch to the fleet.

"Ascend thy chariot, haste with speed away,
And great Machaon to the ships convey,
A wise physician skilled our wounds to heal,
Is more than armies to the public weal."

The distinctions conferred on military surgeons, in modern times, attest the value assigned to their knowledge and skill. Napoleon, besides rewarding in a substantial manner the services of Baron Larrey, his Surgeon in Chief, honored him in his last will and testament with a bequest, and pronounced him the most virtuous man he had known. The laurels acquired by the surgeons of our revolutionary army, still remain in freshness on their tombs. The name

* North American Med. and Surg. Journal, No. 4, p. 351, 354.

of Dr. Craik is rendered imperishable by the honor bestowed upon him, and by the legacy left him by the illustrious Commander-in-Chief. In the words of his biographer "he was one, and what a proud eulogy it is, of whom the immortal Washington was pleased to write in his will, 'my compatriot in arms, my old and intimate friend.'"

But there is another duty imposed on the physician, by the public authorities. He is frequently summoned to give his opinion at coroners' inquests, and in courts of justice. In certain criminal cases, subjects exclusively medical, require to be elucidated, before a satisfactory verdict can be rendered; subjects which sometimes involve questions of the most intricate and perplexing nature, and upon the correct decision of which, depends the administration of justice. In no public situation can a physician be placed, in which his medical knowledge is so likely to be thoroughly tested as in giving testimony before an enlightened court and jury; and hence, none but those who have devoted themselves to the study of juridical medicine can appear with credit at a public tribunal as a medical witness. Whether the subjects, on which his opinion is demanded, relate to the slighter offences against the State, or to the more aggravated ones of murder by mechanical violence or poison; or whether they respect the condition of individuals with regard to sanity of intellect, the duty of the medical jurist is in a high degree responsible. Erroneous opinions given in such cases, may sometimes either allow the guilty to escape retribution, or consign to death or imprisonment persons innocent of the charges alleged against them. Can any reflection occasion deeper contrition than that which must arise in the mind of a conscientious physician who discovers, after an innocent fellow-being has been ignominiously deprived of life, that through his ignorance, culpable

ignorance, he had contributed to a result so fearful! The great improvements which have been made in Medical Jurisprudence within the last thirty years, have given to this branch of medicine so high a degree of importance, that no medical man is excusable for neglecting its study. In no country has it received more extensive contributions than in the United States; and I take pleasure in stating, that two of the graduates of this college have given to the world the most elaborate and valuable elementary work which has appeared on the subject.*

In taking a general survey of the public duties of physicians, it may not be improper to speak of those of medical teachers. In truth, when regarded with attention, these duties appear to be deserving of more consideration than those of medical men in any other situation; for upon the proper performance of them, in a great degree depends the qualifications of those, who are destined to pursue the practice of medicine as a profession, and consequently upon whom will devolve the duty of serving the community both in a public and private capacity.

In every country where literature and science receive the fostering care of the government, legislators have seen the wisdom of establishing seminaries for educating youth in the elements of medicine; and, as the interests of the public are closely connected with the prosperity of such institutions, they have generally received the approbation and support of the people. When regularly organized, and provided with the means of carrying into effect, a system of medical education, the public may reasonably expect that their welfare will be promoted by sustaining them, especially if the persons who assume the responsibilities of instructors

* T. Romeyn Beck, M.D., and John B. Beck, M.D.

be qualified for their stations. It is obvious, that no one is fitted for a preceptor, who is not himself a proficient in the art or science he professes to teach. An acquaintance with the elements and doctrines of the several branches of medicine, a talent for accurate observation and analytical research, a discriminating mind, a facility in communicating knowledge, and studious habits, are among the more important and essential qualifications of the medical teacher. To these, should be united a deep sense of the responsibility of his office and an exemplary moral deportment.

Teachers of theoretical and practical medicine are perhaps more prone to adhere pertinaciously to opinions they have long entertained, than professors in any other department of philosophy. They are too frequently disposed to rest their hopes of fame upon the establishment of theories which new and accumulating facts are daily proving to be visionary. This disposition to adhere to doctrines, which have been often revolved in the mind, is, by no means, unnatural. It is frequently the attendant of old age, and of ardent and opinionated temperaments. Sometimes it results from a perverse unwillingness to yield, when refuted by the plainest and most conclusive arguments. Such a disposition, from whatever cause it may spring, should be avoided or controlled by every votary of science. The teacher of medicine should carefully avoid its influence; for, medicine, perhaps above every other, is a progressive science. Its theories are often nothing but ingenious hypotheses, which serve no other purpose than to bind together a series of facts, and which by the observation or discovery of new facts are rendered nugatory. Theories, however, are sometimes usefully employed in scientific researches; but they should never be allowed to impede our progress in

the pursuit of inductive truth. The late Dr. Wm. Hunter remarks, in his introductory lecture to anatomy, that "In our branch, those teachers who study to captivate young minds with ingenious speculations, will not leave a reputation behind them, that will outlive them half a century. When they cease from their labors, their labors will be buried along with them."

Boerhaave, after completing his mechanical and humoral theory, in forming which he freely availed himself of the labors of his predecessors, admitted no material changes in it. He devoted his attention chiefly to the physical qualities of the body, neglecting, for the most part, the phenomena, which depend upon the vital properties. Had he allowed himself to investigate dispassionately, the opinions of his contemporaries, Stahl and Hoffmann, the first of whom led the way in the study of the vital powers, and the second to the functions of the nervous system, he might have so modified his system of pathology as to give it a degree of perfection, that would perhaps have secured for it a longer duration of authority in the schools, and left less room for succeeding pathologists to distinguish themselves by overthrowing his doctrines, and establishing others in their place. In this respect Boerhaave affords a striking instance of an ingenuous and noble mind, adhering to a favorite system, even when the light of truth had shone with sufficient brightness to show its defects.*

* It is due, however, to the fame of this illustrious physician, to state, as it is remarked by Dr. Good, that "his mind in the latter part of his life, was so fully open to the merits of this (Hoffmannian) hypothesis, that he admitted the agency of the nervous power, though a doctrine that struck at the root of his own system; of which we have a clear proof in the change which occurs in the fourth edition of his aphorisms, and particularly aphorism 755, where he lays down the proximate cause of intermittant fever."—(*Study of Medicine, Vol. 2, p. 34.*)

There are examples of distinguished teachers abandoning their favorite theories, when, either from their own inquiries, or the arguments of others, they have been proved to be erroneous. The late Dr. Armstrong publicly renounced his opinion of the specific contagiousness of typhus fever. His biographer, remarks that, "it has been objected to him, that he is inconsistent with himself; that the opinions towards the close of his life are opposed to those which he published at the outset of his career. I admit," he continues, "the fact, and claim from it, an acknowledgment from candid minds, of the integrity of his own." Dr. Rush, though inflexible with regard to most of his medical opinions, greatly increased the lustre of his fame by changing his views respecting the causes and mode of propagation of yellow fever. He says that "the candor of Sydenham discovers itself by the readiness with which he acknowledges his having mistaken a nervous fever for a bastard peripneumony;" and he adds that "such instances of magnanimity are very rare in all sciences; and from the influence which they have upon both interest and reputation, are less common among physicians, than men of other professions."*

When teachers of medicine confine their theories to subjects which have no direct bearing on practice, their ambitious efforts to sustain them, are, in some degree, excusable. But when from such theories are deduced principles and rules for our guidance in the cure of diseases, the interests of humanity require that they be decried and exploded. Some of the theoretical systems and vagaries which have risen and flourished in our own times are clearly chargeable, in their practical application, with evils of this kind. I allude more especially to the doctrines of Homœopathy

* Memoir of the Life and Medical opinions of John Armstrong, M.D., &c., by Francis Boott, M.D.

and the fictions of Mesmerism. To those who have enriched their minds with the treasures of classical medical literature, and made observation and experience the basis of their reasoning and practice in medicine, the infinitesimal therapeutic appliances of the former, and the chimeras and prestiges of the latter, betray an utter disregard of sound experimental truth, and a blind or wilful devotion to visionary hypotheses.

I would not be understood as intimating that the principles of medicine are altogether unsettled and constantly changing, and, therefore, should be distrusted. It is against the seductions of speculation, and the trammels of exclusive theories only, that medical teachers should cautiously guard themselves. There are great and fundamental truths which have long been established, and which constitute the guides of rational practice. These truths, it is the province of the medical instructor to expound and illustrate. It is his duty rather to exhibit the structure and functions of the body, the phenomena of health and disease, and the effects of remedial agents as ascertained by experience, than to expend his labor in attempts to elucidate final causes, or to determine the manner in which pathological and curative effects are produced. Still these latter phenomena are legitimate subjects of investigation, and should be studied with all the cautions inculcated by the Baconian philosophy,—always bearing in mind the sentiment of a biographer* of Bichat, that “the philosopher should confine himself to the study and observation of the sensible phenomena which the structure and functions of organized matter exhibit, without endeavoring to penetrate further;—beyond, an immense abyss commences,—we should take

* Scipio Pinel. See Beclard's Additions to the General Anatomy of Bichat.

care, lest we fall into it." In the present state of our knowledge, medicine can receive no solid accessions from theoretical systems. It is justly remarked by Reveille-Parise, that "the eclectic school is the positive school of our art, the *realism* of medicine."

But public medical instruction is not confined to collegiate institutions. In many instances, the business of teaching incidentally attaches to the medical officers of general hospitals, and particularly of metropolitan hospitals. These establishments, though sustained by the bounty of the public, could have no existence, or rather would fail to fulfil their benevolent ends, were it not for physicians and surgeons. It is true, the chief occupation of medical men in hospitals, is to cure and alleviate disease; but in connection with this service it is their duty, as opportunities may offer under certain regulations, to give lessons in clinical medicine, to exhibit to the student the veritable forms, symptoms and phases of disease, to practically illustrate the methods of diagnosis, to show the processes of operative surgery, and to teach, by example, the art of prescribing the therapeutic and regimenal treatment. In performing these duties, medical men assume a double responsibility; first, that connected with the welfare of the patients committed to their care; and secondly, that relating to the consequences which may, in private practice, result from the instruction given to those, who follow them in their visits to the bed-side.

In glancing at the duties of hospital physicians and surgeons, we must not omit to notice the obligations resting on those, who have in charge asylums for the insane. It is in these institutions, that physicians are called to exercise their skill, in the treatment of a class of affections which, in many points, essentially differ from those admitted into

ordinary hospitals, and to manage which, requires a kind of knowledge not cultivated by the profession generally. So important is this department of medicine regarded by the professional gentlemen at the head of the lunatic establishments in this country, that in order to its improvement, they have recently formed themselves into a body, styled "The Association of Medical Superintendants of American Institutions for the Insane." In this Association they hope to be enabled to accumulate an amount of experience, which will tend to improve the methods of treating the most formidable of human maladies. Their purpose is worthy of all praise; and we cannot doubt that their labors will result in the enlargement of their qualifications to manage the thousand varied forms of moral and intellectual insanity,—

" To minister to a mind diseased ;
 Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
 Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
 And with some sweet oblivious antidote
 Cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff
 Which weighs upon the heart."

Besides the various public duties of physicians, which have been mentioned, there are others of a more general nature. The character of a nation principally depends upon the attention it gives to the promotion of letters, science, and the arts; and as the learned professions embrace a large proportion of those, who are devoted to the advancement of knowledge, it is obvious that upon them chiefly devolves the obligation to support and elevate the literary and scientific character of their country. Of these professions, that of medicine is the one, from which are expected the largest additions to the natural sciences. Medical men are among the chief laborers in these departments

of research; and hence it is incumbent on them to give demonstrations of zeal and diligence in their pursuit. In which, indeed, of these branches of study, have not medical men been always and every where actively and successfully engaged? Witness, for example, their efficient participation in the recent laborious surveys of the natural history of this country, conducted under the authority and auspices of the State governments: and may I not specify, in particular, the extensive contributions made to botanical science, by one of my learned friends and colleagues in this institution?*

The duty to which I now refer, though common to the physicians of every country, is perhaps especially imperative on those of America, on account of the assertion long since made that the climate and soil, and also the animal and vegetable productions of this continent are inferior to those of Europe. This assertion, being unsupported by facts, would never have required an elaborate refutation, had it proceeded from persons of less distinction than Buffon, Robertson, and the Abbé Raynall. The mere authority of such names has had the effect to impress on the minds of Europeans a belief of its truth. The simple denial of it on our part, has not been sufficient to rebut the aspersion. Positive proofs have been, and perhaps are still required to show its falsity. Among those who have successfully defended our country, against the charge of inferiority, none have offered stronger facts, or more convincing arguments than physicians. The late Dr. Williamson has clearly and satisfactorily shown that "there is not any vice of the climate, or combination of elements which prevents the expansion of animated nature, and causes man and

* John Torrey, M.D. LL.D.

beast to degenerate." It is undeniable that a country overspread with forests, the growth of a thousand years, and untouched by the plough and the spade, is not in a condition to favor the development of the higher intellectual and moral powers. But this fact is no proof that its climate is radically vicious. The atmosphere of America is essentially the same in its constitution as that of Europe. The sun shines as resplendently in our western skies, as he does in those of France, Italy, and Greece; and when the American soil shall be further subdued by agricultural industry, may we not expect an amelioration of climate? Already in this respect, has a remarkable change been effected; and there is reason to believe, that, at a period not very distant, the United States, in some parts at least, will possess an atmosphere as pure and invigorating, as exists in the most favored regions of the earth. It cannot be conceded that the climate of our country has at any time prevented the expansion of the human mind. In its primitive state, it may have had such a tendency; but that tendency has been rendered inoperative by circumstances of a moral and political nature, circumstances sufficiently powerful to overcome greater evils than the depressing climatic influences of an uncultivated country.

Temperate climates are peculiarly favorable to the development of the physical and intellectual constitution of man. That portion of the eastern continent, which lies between the twenty-third and sixtieth degrees of north latitude, embraces all the countries, in which our species have attained the highest degree of perfection. With this fact before us, what may we not hope for in the corresponding latitudes of North America? The United States on the western continent, and Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece, together with a part of France, Germany, Egypt, and

Arabia lie within the same parallels; and consequently under similar circumstances, we should expect man to become as highly improved and polished in the one as in the other. A comparison of places equally distant from the equator on the two continents would not in the present age, be humiliating to our country. Rome once the seat of universal empire, is nearly in the same latitude with Boston; but though possessing a milder physical climate, and superior in adventurous splendor, has produced few statesmen or philosophers equal to Franklin. If we trace the lines of latitude, which intersect Greece, through our own country, we shall find them to pass through Virginia, the birth-place of Washington, in whom were united the moral daring and personal courage of Philip and Alexander, the patriotism of Epaminondas, the legislative wisdom of Solon, and the sublime moral sense of Plato. Such comparative remarks might be extended to almost every climate of our republic, and in no instance should we have reason to blush. "If genius, industry, erudition, and the liberal arts are begotten and nourished in a temperate climate and a pure atmosphere," says Dr. Williamson, "America has much to expect, for the climate will ever be temperate, and the atmosphere pure, through the greater part of the continent."

The Americans, I am aware, have been accused of too much self-flattery; and a British medical journalist has hinted the impolicy of praising ourselves so immeasurably, as we thereby leave no room for others to perform that friendly office for us, on proper occasions. The accusation perhaps is just; but when we reflect that it is only within a few years that our moral and political institutions, our arts, literature, and sciences have been deemed worthy of serious examination, and much less of comparison with those of Europe, we shall find just ground of apology for

the alleged impropriety. It is by no means wonderful that in defending ourselves against the imputation of degeneracy, we may have been urged by the taunts of Europeans to rate our attainments in knowledge and moral excellence, more highly than sober reflection would justify. Happily the period has arrived in which more friendly feelings are reciprocally manifested, and in which the scientific, medical, theological, and literary productions of our countrymen mingle with those of Europe, and every where receive, according to their merit the respect due them in the great community of philosophy and letters.

Gentlemen, Graduates, and Students of Medicine :

In thus bringing before you some of the public duties of physicians, it has been my purpose to show that the science of medicine, so far from being limited in its application to private or clinical practice, has bearings on objects intimately connected with the prosperity, happiness, and character of your country. A science with relations so various and important, affords, it is believed, ample room for the exercise of the highest order of intellect. Eminence, founded on positive merit, is, in few vocations, more universal and durable than in the profession of medicine. The desire to rise to an equality with, or superior to others is a feeling common to noble minds, and which, if duly cherished, doubles the power of the understanding, and sustains it in its highest efforts. Let ambition, therefore, regulated by principles of virtue and honor, exert within you its stirring influence, ever remembering, that united with talent and industry, it is the means of mighty achievement,—it is the source of immortal renown.

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