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# MEDICINE

AS A

## Profession for Women.

BY

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*A Paper read at the SOCIAL SCIENCE CONGRESS, June 11th,  
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# MEDICINE AS A PROFESSION FOR WOMEN.

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IN speaking of Medicine as a profession for women, it is not my intention to enter upon the general question of the employment of women. I may be allowed, however, in passing, to protest against a notion which seems to have taken possession of many minds, that those who are endeavouring to extend the range of women's labour, are desirous of adding to the severity of their toil. Women already work hard, and it ought scarcely to be said that we wish to increase the aggregate amount of their labour. What we are striving for is rather a re-adjustment of the burden, a somewhat different apportionment of mental and physical labour as relatively distributed between men and women. We desire to see such a condition of society as is described by Coleridge, who, in picturing an imagined golden age, speaks of it as a time "when labour was a sweet name for the activity of sane minds in healthful bodies." It is not too much to say that the great mass of women are much less healthy, both in mind and body, than they might be if they had a fair chance of physical and mental development. Many ladies are sickly and hysterical, not, strictly speaking, from want of work, but from the want of

some steady occupation, sufficiently interesting and important to take them out of themselves. The very poor, on the other hand, are worn down by an amount and a kind of physical toil, for which their frames were never intended, their minds being utterly uncultivated, while their earnings are so small that it is impossible for them to maintain themselves in decency and comfort.\* Of neither of these classes can it be fairly said that they are in that state of life into which it has pleased God to call them. Some other agency must be at work, some disturbing cause, hindering them from filling their appropriate position. It is to help them to find their place, and to occupy it when found, that our efforts are directed.

If it be true, as the most experienced persons tell us, that what women want in the way of employment is something which gives room for the exercise of their mental activities, without excessive physical toil, we are led to inquire in what professions and occupations these conditions can be obtained. For ladies, it is also requisite that the occupation should not involve the forfeiture of social position. A parent may reasonably say, "I feel that my daughter would be better and happier with some definite work, but what can I bring her up to?" The practice of Medicine among women and children, as being to all appearance essentially a woman's work, naturally occurs first, and we have now to consider whether it fulfils the before-mentioned conditions. As to the first—no one doubts that the study and practice of Medicine afford ample scope for the use of the mental powers. Some persons have indeed expressed a fear that, the minds of women being naturally inferior, the strain on

\* Those who have come into immediate contact, as I have, with the female workers in glass-houses, paper-mills, brick-yards, &c., will confess that this is no exaggerated statement.

their faculties would be too great. There seems little reason, however, to apprehend danger on this score, as a little observation proves that the most highly cultivated women, whose mental energies are at least as much in use as those of average doctors, are not less healthy-minded than others, but rather the reverse. With regard to bodily exertion, there is no doubt that a physician in full practice goes through a very considerable amount of work. But after all, walking, and riding, and driving about, are among the recognised means of gaining health, and even the night work, of which some share falls to the lot of all doctors, is perhaps not much more trying to the constitution than the night work habitually performed by ladies of all ages, in heated rooms, and under other unfavourable circumstances. It should be understood throughout that in making these comparisons, I speak of the general run of doctors all over the country, not of a few picked men at the head of their profession, on whose energies the demand must be extraordinarily great, and with whom it would not be necessary for ladies to compete.

The last-named condition, that the profession should not involve the sacrifice of social position is the one which marks out Medicine as eminently suitable for women of the middle class. We are constantly told that women are made to be nurses, and that a better class of nurses is urgently required. But it seems to be forgotten that though a few philanthropic ladies may undertake nursing in hospitals or among the poor, as a work of charity, without loss of social rank, the business of hired nurse cannot be looked upon as a profession for a lady. The salary of a hospital nurse is less than the wages of a butler or a groom, and even supposing that superior women would command higher remuneration,

neration, the position of a nurse is in every way too nearly allied to that of an upper servant, to be in the least appropriate for the daughters and sisters of the mercantile and professional classes.

Apart from the foregoing considerations, which apply chiefly to the want of some outlet for the mental energies of women, there is another aspect of the question, which ought not to be overlooked. I refer to the want of women in the medical profession. The existence of this want is not generally admitted by medical men, but I submit that they are not likely to be the best judges. It is an unquestionable fact, and here I speak, not from hearsay or conjecture, but from personal knowledge obtained by extended inquiry, that women of all ranks, do earnestly desire the attendance of physicians of their own sex. The want is most strongly felt by those who cannot command the services of the higher class of medical men. It is equally unquestionable, and here again I speak from authority, that women wish to enter the profession. Is not the mere existence of these two corresponding facts, a sufficient reason for giving leave to try the experiment? If we fail, we fail, and having fairly tried, we shall be content to abide by the result. That an innovation is an innovation, is not a sufficient ground for opposing it. The opponents of a change are bound to give reasons for their resistance. In the case under consideration, I am ready to admit that they have done so freely. Some of the objections seem indeed to cancel each other. For instance, one asks, "Where are your lady students to come from?" while another complains, "What is to become of the men, if women crowd into this already overstocked profession?" At one time, women are ordered to keep their place, while at another they are assured that their place is at the

bedside of the sick. Those who are most anxious to see women waiting upon male patients as nurses, consider it an outrage upon propriety that they should attend their own sex as physicians.

There are, however, more serious difficulties than these thoughtless cavils. It cannot be denied that there are grave objections to the study of medicine by male and female students in mixed schools, and although a few exceptional women might be willing, for the sake of others, to go through the medical course, even under existing arrangements, it is evident that for female students generally, some modification of these arrangements would be necessary. Such a modification might easily be effected, if the demand for it were clearly made out. Separate classes might be formed for lady students, in connexion with the existing schools. There would be no difficulty in obtaining the services of eminent medical men as teachers. Some of those who most strongly object to the admission of ladies into the schools for men, have expressed their willingness to give separate instruction. The examinations must, of course, be the same for both sexes, as a security that the standard of proficiency should not be lowered for women, but to that there can be no objection. The difficulties of the case arise, neither from a want of aptitude on the part of women, to whom the practice of Medicine seems to come more naturally than to men, nor from the opposition of the medical authorities, many of whom have shown marked liberality and freedom from prejudice. The real obstacles are, the unwillingness of young women to incur the reproach of singularity and self-sufficiency, and the less excusable unwillingness of their parents and friends to aid them in overcoming difficulties which they cannot conquer alone. The medical course ought to

be begun early in life, and young women cannot be expected to force themselves into a profession against the wishes of those to whom they have learnt to look up for advice and guidance. At the same time, it should be remembered that no class are more sensitively alive to the influence of public opinion, than the parents of daughters. Many people who would be favourable to women-physicians in the abstract, would shrink from giving the least encouragement to their own daughters to take a single step out of the beaten path. And it is here that we can all do something. We can at least refrain from joining in the thoughtless cry of horror and astonishment at the idea of women-physicians. Ladies may help much by simply making known in the proper quarters their wish for the medical attendance of women. By so doing they would encourage ladies to offer themselves as students, and would afford to them a moral support which they much need. We cannot, indeed, save them from the prominence which must be the lot of the pioneers in any movement, a prominence which has little attraction for those thoughtful women, who, feeling the responsibilities of life more strongly than others, are more earnest in desiring to take their modest share in the work of the world. A certain amount of notoriety is unavoidable, but it rests with the public to decide whether it shall be an unmerited stigma or an honourable distinction.

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