Address to the graduates of the Medical Institution of Geneva College : delivered January 25th, 1842 / by C.B. Coventry.

Coventry (C. B.)

ADDRESS

TO THE

GRADUATES

OF THE

MEDICAL INSTITUTION OF GENEVA COLLEGE.

Delivered January 25th, 1842.

BY C. B. COVENTRY, M. D.,

DEAN OF THE FACULTY AND PROFESSOR OF OBSTETRICS AND MEDICAL JURISPRUDENCE.

box 3

BUBLISHED BY REQUEST OF THE CLASS.

UTICA:
DEMOCRAT OFFICE, 113 GENESEE STREET.

1842.

GENEVA MEDICAL COLLEGE, *January 25th*, 1842.

PROF. COVENTRY,

DEAR SIR,—At a meeting of the members of the Graduating Class, this day held, Mr. Joseph P. Dunlap was called to the Chair, and a resolution unanimously passed that we request of you a copy of your very able valedictory address for publication.

Allow us, therefore, as a Committee, by them appointed, to say that it gives us great pleasure to comply with their request.

Yours very respectfully,

ALFRED BERGEN,
DELASKIE MILLER,
B. L. HOVEY,
O. S. PATTERSON,
E. N. CLARK,
} Committee.

GENEVA, *January 25th*, 1842.

GENTLEMEN:—I had the honor of receiving your note of to-day, and though the address was not intended or prepared for publication, I do not feel justified in refusing the polite request of those for whom it was delivered. I will, therefore, furnish a copy for publication at my earliest convenience.

Please to present to the Class, and accept for yourselves, Gentlemen, the assurance of respect and esteem.

Most respectfully yours,

C. B. COVENTRY.

Messrs. Bergen, Miller, Hovey, Patterson, and Clark.

ADDRESS.

GENTLEMEN:

The period to which you have looked forward with so much solicitude has at length arrived, the dreaded ordeal is passed, your pupilage is ended, and henceforth we stand as brethren in the honorable profession which you have chosen. In behalf of my colleagues and myself, in behalf of our common profession, permit me to welcome you to its ranks, and to congratulate you on the successful termination of this first stage in your professional life. At such a time when you are about to enter upon the responsibilities incumbent on your new relation to the profession and the public, it cannot but be a matter of interest to inquire how far the profession you have chosen is calculated to ensure that happiness which must be admitted to be the end and aim of all human exertion, and in what manner, and with what views your profession should be practiced in order to attain this great end. Man is endowed by his creator with certain physical, moral, and intellectual faculties, the exercise and gratification of which (when restrained within due bounds) is attended with pleasure, and that profession or occupation which calls into activity the greatest number of these (unless counterbalanced by some other cause) must be most promotive of individual happiness. Of the instinctive desires implanted in the constitution of man, some are essential to his health and continued existence; some to the well being of community and the happiness of others. Whilst some would seem to be given to add to man's individual enjoyments and happiness.

Muscular exercise is essential to health, and when confined within due limits is attended with pleasure. This is particularly the case with the young, when exercise is attended with enjoyment and confinement the severest punishment. The desire of food is imperative and impels the individual to every exertion for its gratification, and this gratification may be ranked among the rational enjoyments of life. Connected with this is the desire of accumulation, which

prompts us to provide against future want. This is not, as might be imagined, the result of reason, for we find it strong where there is but little power of reasoning, and feeble where this power is strongest. Again, reason would dictate that when there was an ample supply against future want, the desire should cease. We however find it not only existing in full force, but almost uncontrollable where there is least necessity for its exertion.

It would then seem that any profession that did not promise to furnish what is essential to our physical comfort, and gratify to a certain extent the innate love of gain or accumulation, must be deficient in some of the essential means of happiness. It is true our profession does not promise the accumulation of wealth. Nay, more, we may say, its proper exercise is usually incompatible with the accumulation of a large fortune, and although a Dupuytren, a Cooper, and a Physic may have realized fortunes from the practice of their profession, the number is small, and there is scarce a reputable occupation which, in proportion to its numbers, could not enumerate a larger number of fortunes than the practice of medicine. If then we have no other or higher motive than to grow rich and fatten on the misery and suffering of our fellow men we have mistaken our calling, and would be wise to abandon it for the more lucrative lap-stone, the plough, or the anvil. If, however, our aspirations are confined to what is essential to our physical wants, and our desire of accumulation limited within those bounds which reason would seem to dictate, no profession promises it with more certainty than that of medicine. Disease and death are confined to no age of the world, to no country, to no state or condition of society; and wherever disease is found, the services of the intelligent and educated physician are required to avert death and to sooth and assuage the pangs of disease. Whether among the untutored tribes of our own native forests, the Arabs of the desert, the savage inhabitants of Central America, the arrogant Chinese, or the most polished circles of Europe, your profession is at all times and in all places (where mankind are found) in demand, and its exercise will command the necessaries of life when all other resources fail—where even gold becomes valueless. We have this truth beautifully illustrated, in the

account given by Catlin, of the respect every where paid even among the wildest tribes of Indians to the medicine man; the account given by Stephens of the importuntty of the Bedouin Arabs for prescriptions; the frequent application for medicine among the ruins of Copan; the success which has attended our missionaries, Parker in China, and Grant among the Nestorians in Persia, from the practice of their profession as physicians. But perhaps no incident can illustrate it more strongly than one connected with the fate of the unfortunate *Latner*. In one of the skirmishes with the Indians, in Florida, Dr. Latner, who was a surgeon in the army, was wounded and taken prisoner. At a time, and under circumstances when no other lives were spared he was carried thirty miles on a litter by his savage foes, treated with every attention and kindness, with the view of preserving his life; unfortunately one of the company, who had lost a brother in the engagement, more vindictive than the rest, watched his opportunity and when unobserved, shot him. But there are higher and nobler aspirations in the constitution of man than the mere gratification of his physical wants, the satisfying of which are not essential to his existence, but necessary in order to attain the highest degree of happiness of which he is susceptible. The feeling of benevolence, like all the other moral and intellectual faculties, is strengthened by use, and its exercise in acts of kindness to the destitute and helpless constitute some of the noblest and purest enjoyments of life.

One of the greatest advantages resulting from the possession of wealth is the means which it furnishes of ministering to the suffering of our fellow men. If you do not possess wealth, in the practice of your profession you possess a power of ministering to suffering humanity, often more valued than money. Even Doctor Samuel Johnson, though he speak sneeringly of the profession, is compelled to admit that "every man has found in physicians great liberality and dignity of sentiment, very prompt effusions of beneficence and willingness to exert a lucrative art where there was no hope of lucre."

The desire of the approbation of others, or of our fellow men, is often one of the strongest and most active impulses of our nature. We find it in all situations, from the puny school-boy who strives to reach the

head of his form, to the hero who on the ensanguined plain lays down his life to obtain the meed of glory. Implanted in man by his Creator for useful ends, when prompted by the principle of benevolence and guided by reason, it becomes one of the noblest of our desires; but to secure the approbation of the wise and good (whose approbation is alone worth possessing), we must so conduct as to secure their confidence and esteem. In no profession does this feeling operate with more force than in that of medicine. It is indeed given to but few to live in the memory of after ages, but if we trace the historic page, we shall find that our profession has contributed its full quota to the illustrious names not doomed to die. It is, however, in their own particular circles that it is most operative. It has been said, and perhaps with truth, that no man is so apt to become vain as the country practitioner of medicine who has acquired some reputation in his profession; cut off by the pressure of business from an extended intercourse with the world, every where received with a cordial welcome, almost a dictator in his little circle, his mind must be strong indeed if it is not sometimes thrown from its balance and betray that egotism which is often a weakness of truly great minds. We find that man in a state of cultivation has an inherent love of the sublime and beautiful, and that all nature is adapted to its gratification. No feeling is more improved by cultivation; and none is calculated to furnish more pure and unalloyed enjoyment, or contribute more to individual happiness; this is almost the only instinctive feeling which seems to have been created purely to contribute to intellectual enjoyment. Nearly all the others—whilst their gratification contributes to the happiness of the individual—are made subservient to the preservation of life, the well being of community, or the happiness or comfort of our fellow beings. In all this we cannot but admire the wisdom and goodness of the divine author of our being, who has so constituted man that the fulfilment of his duties to his Creator and to his fellow man should at the same time constitute his highest enjoyment. Aside from the evidence of revelation, one of the strongest evidences of a superior and superintending power, is, that there is implanted in the constitution of man a disposition to venerate and worship such a power, and that in the absence of all knowledge

of the true God, they worship the sun, the moon, and stars, or wood and stone, in the forms they imagine the Deity to possess.

Man is not only created with physical wants and moral sentiments but with intellectual faculties which long and thirst after knowledge ; without their gratification his happiness must be imperfect, and he almost necessarily becomes the slave of bigotry or superstition. It has been found that solitary confinement, where none of the moral or intellectual faculties are exercised, produces a species of imbecility somewhat analogous to the effect of confinement on the muscular system, and that in those mechanical employments where there is a constant repetition of the same act without requiring any mental effort, the operative in time approaches the other parts of the machinery in point of intelligence. It is then susceptible of demonstration that as perfect physical health cannot be enjoyed without the exercise of every part of the physical organization, so the highest degree of moral and intellectual perfection cannot be attained without the exercise of all those faculties with which his maker has endowed him, consequently no profession or employment which is incompatible with this cultivation can lead to man's highest happiness. How is it with the profession you have chosen ? The objects of study places it among the highest branches of philosophy ; it is indeed the study of nature and of those laws which God has written on his works, and as manifested in the noblest of his works—man himself. Whilst its practice calls into constant exercise and activity the moral sentiments.

If men were left to the unrestrained and unguided influence of these impulses it would not only lead them into excesses inconsistent with their own welfare, but to trample on the rights of others and the general interests of community. We find therefore an internal monitor whose voice is in accordance with the divine injunction "do unto others as you would that they should do unto you." Man is also endowed with reason which teaches him from his own past experience and the experience of others that an unlimited indulgence of any of the innate propensities, destroys the proper harmony of the system either physical or moral and he suffers the penalty imposed for all violations of the natural laws. These however are not always sufficient

to restrain men within the bounds of right, and another principle is added, viz : that of self-respect. We may for the moment be pleased and flattered by the admiration of others, but if it is attended with the conviction that it is undeserved or unworthily bestowed, it soon ceases to afford any gratification and every mark of respect adds an additional sting to our own sense of unworthiness.

If then we would secure and enjoy the respect and esteem of our fellow men we must so live that an approving conscience will tell us it is worthily bestowed. Is there then any thing in your profession incompatible with the highest degree of happiness granted to man whilst on earth? It is believed not! Your happiness or misery must then depend in a great measure on the use you make of the means placed within your reach ; remember that where much is given much is required, and if you have received ten talents a proportionate return will be demanded at your hands.

You are, young gentlemen, about to enter upon a new and to you untried stage of duty; one which you will find beset with many thorns, and temptations : you are henceforth to take your stand in society not only as citizens, but as members of an arduous and responsible profession. Much as it regards your future happiness, your prosperity and usefulness will depend upon the resolutions you may now form, and the views with which you enter upon the discharge of your new duties. If, disregarding the promptings of benevolence and the whisperings of conscientiousness, you propose to yourselves no higher motives than to minister to your own necessities and the accumulation of money, you can scarcely hope for, as you certainly can never deserve success : but should your most sanguine anticipations be realized, you will find or feel the profession to be what it has sarcastically been represented, " a melancholy attendance on misery, a mean submission to peevishness and a continued interruption to pleasure." If on the contrary you consider your profession an instrument in the hands of Providence for diffusing blessings to others at the same time that you minister to your own wants—if you consider nothing degrading that has for its object the relief of the suffering of your fellow men,—if you feel that to confer happiness on others is the purest and noblest of all pleasure,

If you agree with the old Roman, who declared "Homines ad Deos nulla se proprius accedent qunm salutem hominibus dando," youmay reasonably hope for, and anticipate success. Let me then advise you on commencing your professional career, to calmly, deliberately, and after a full survey of all your responsibilities, determine on your future course and conduct; having once established your course, adhere to it as a land-mark,—leave it not to be settled on every emergency; assailed by temptations from without and within, seduced by pretended friends, or harrassed by want, or the pressure of avocation. With a constant repetition of the same trials and temptations, no man can be always prepared to weigh deliberately the propriety or advisability of a course; and if he has no fixed principle, no polar star by which at once to decide every question, he will be constantly harrassed with doubt and uncertainty, and fortunate indeed will he be if he does not in some unguarded moment yield to temptation and make ship-wreck of his own hopes, and the fond expectation of his friends. At no period of life will you find yourselves more competent for such a duty than the present. Wait until temptation assail and it will be too late. Having established your principles of conduct let them be inviolate,—stop not to enquire whether there may not be sufficient reason or excuse for their violation, or how it will affect your business or your popularity. If it is a violation of principles you have deliberately adopted, it should be sufficient.

In the prosecution of your profession guard against becoming wedded to any particular theory or doctrine. Nothing has tended more to retard improvement in our science than this devotion to authority. Remember that medical science is founded on observation, and consists of the recorded observation of several successive ages; that the study of medicine is simply the study of nature; that no theory of medicine founded on any other principle can be true; and that any theory or doctrine subversive of established principles, (even though professing to be founded on observation), should require as long a test, and an equal number of facts to have equal claims to your confidence. No man can pretend that the science is perfect: far from it: on the contrary all admit its imperfection; it is not therefore against improve-

ments in practice, or discoveries in physiology, or the introduction of new articles in the Materia Medica we would caution you, but against doctrines and theories subversive of the very foundation of our science. Be not, however, too ready to adopt pretended improvements ; remember that where the life or health of a fellow being is at stake, nothing should be hazarded by experiment. On the other hand, we should not be so strongly wedded to modes of practice as to reject improvements that come sufficiently authenticated, merely because they are new. Modesty would seem to dictate that we should treat with respect the opinions and views of others, who are, (even when measured by our own estimate) quite as competent as ourselves to judge, and whose opportunity for examining the subject has been far greater.

Far be it from me to recommend you to sacrifice your own honest convictions to the mere opinions of any man. We should, however, treat the opinions of others with the same charity we ask for our own, and to speak contemptuously and sneeringly of the views of others under the circumstances we have enumerated, unless sustained by evidence which will carry conviction to every honest and unprejudiced mind, will be very apt to rebound on our own heads.

Be not discouraged from the want of business when you first enter upon your professional career. No period of life is more trying than that which intervenes between the termination of pupilage and the successful establishment in business, and in no profession or occupation is this probation more irksome than in medicine. It is a popular opinion, and one which to a certain extent is founded in truth, that of all professions in none is experience so indispensable as in the practice of medicine, and as a corollary that in the physician grey hairs are necessary to wisdom. If, therefore, you find, on offering your services to the public, they do not meet that demand you had reason to expect or fondly imagined they deserved, be not discouraged.

The results of the moral laws of creation are not less certain, (though not so apparent), than those of the physical, and with almost the same certainty that time will bring the grey hairs, will proper qualifications, with industry and application, aided by even moderate

talents, bring employment. No person when he first commences his professional career can be qualified to enter at once upon an extensive practice and sustain it; if the misjudged partiality of friends should place him in such a situation, it is doing him an actual injury, for it is inevitable that in the effort to sustain himself, he ruins his health and breaks down under the weight of toil and care, or he fails in fulfilling the expectations of his friends and the public, and sinks into noglect from which it will be difficult to arise. Let it not be implied that because the young physician is not constantly occupied in business he should be idle; the oldest and wisest have much to learn —how much more the young practitioner. Besides, as a member of the profession he has other duties than those of attendance on the sick. He should endeavor to contribute something to the accumulation of facts and observation which constitute the science of medicine. Let not the young practitioner, because he is remote from large hospitals, and with a limited library, imagine that he can contribute nothing to the stock of medical science. What we want is the study of nature, not of books; and the country practitioner, with a mind properly prepared, is of all others best situated for this purpose. True there are certain parts of the profession which can be best studied in large cities. But if we wish to investigate the "*fons et origorigo*" of disease, the secret poison which springs from the marsh, and is so destructive to our pioneers, to trace its effects, and watch its operation upon constitutions unmodified by the thousand causes operating in large cities, we must go to the country. It was observations on the endemic fever, which was so prevalent and fatal in the early settlement of this place, that elicited from the talented editor of the Med. Chir. Review the following remarks: "A solitary rustic, 'pent up in Utica,' not Cato's Utica, but Utica in the backwoods of America, has published a paper* in a trans-atlantic periodical, which is republished in our respected cotemporary of the north, and which contains, in our humble opinion more rational and just doctrine than some of those propounded by certain self-supposed Savans of Europe."—Med. Chir. Rev., No. 9.

* On the contagious nature of Yellow Fever, by Alexander Coventry.

It is a limited and unjust view of our profession to suppose the only or even the highest duty consists in attendance upon the sick. True, this is sufficiently important; but the medical profession is the guardian of the public health. All our civil, political, and most of our social regulations for guarding against disease are founded upon the advice and direction of the profession. The amount of suffering thus prevented, is far greater than from the immediate prescription for disease; even in our own day we have seen some of the most destructive and pernicious customs overthrown by the persevering efforts of the profession. Time was, even within our remembrance, when a taper waist was deemed a mark of beauty, and comfort, health, and even life was sacrificed for its attainment. But a few years since and the philanthropist was often made to shudder, at seeing youth, beauty and worth, promenading the streets on a winter's day, in prunell slippers, laying the foundation of that fell disease, which hurries so many of our loveliest to a premature grave. Thanks to the persevering efforts of the profession, the prunell has given place to the india rubber; and the taper waist is esteemed by those who would be considered fashionable, (as it is), a deformity. In the great temperance reformation which has done, and is doing so much for the health, comfort, reputation, and happiness of our country, the medical profession have not been inactive. Mr. Delavan, the apostle of temperance in this country, bears the following willing testimony to their influence, —he says: "The influence the physician has had in every stage of the temperance enterprise has been vast; he has in all cases spoken out decidedly." But there are other evils in our country to be remedied, one of which is only second to that of intemperance. I refer to the sale and use of nostrums and quack medicines: few persons who have not been attentive observers can form any conception of the extent of this growing evil, or the mischief which it produces. The man who, without chart orcompass, commits his vessel to the ocean wave, trusting to a favorable wind's wafting it to its destined port, is wise in comparison with him who hazards life and health by tampering with medicines of which he is ignorant; better, much better to abstain from food, keep quiet, and trust to nature for the result, than resort to instruments which unless used by a careful and discriminating hand

are much more liable to do harm than good. To form some idea of the amount of money paid for medicines of this kind, we have but to look at the amount which must be expended for advertising. The proprietor of one of the most popular nostrums of the day, showed me the receipt, under the hope that I would permit him to use my name as a reference, it consisted of articles in every day use by the regular practitioners; valuable when properly applied, but totally improper when indiscriminately administered. Some time after I saw him and enquired how he came on, he replied that he could sell much more than he could manufacture, and that he wanted to get a partner with a few thousand dollars capital. When I observed that the medicine was not expensive, he replied the bottles were far the most expensive part.—Community are both poisoned and robbed by these preparations, for the cost to the proprietors bear no proportion to the price paid by the consumers for the privilege of poisoning themselves. In some cases the foundation of incurable diseases is laid by their use, in other cases and in acute diseases valuable time is lost tampering with nostrums until the time is past when it could have been arrested in its course. To take arms against this passion for empiricism would be more absurd than Don Quixotte's fighting the wind mill. We have seen 30,000 petitioners to the Legislature—and one House of the Legislature two years in succession passing bills to legalize a pretended system of Medicine which discards every principle upon which the science of Medicine is founded, and which was justly described by the observation of Mr. Hoffman, that if correct, the more ignorant a man was, the better was he qualified for the practice of his profession.

The acknowledged leader and head of which says, in reply to the question, "Do you think the study of Anatomy or Physiology of the least use to the Thompsonian Doctor." "We do not." In answer to the question "Do you use any thing in Medicines except vegetables," he says: "One of our apothegms is that the metals and minerals are in the earth, and being extracted from the depths of the earth, have a tendency to carry all down into the earth, or in other words the grave, who use them. That the tendency of all vegetables is to spring up from the earth. Their tendency is upward, their ten-

dency is to invigorate, and fructify, and uphold man from the grave."

Some experience and much reflection on the subject has long since produced the conviction that this is an evil which can neither be combatted by reason nor suppressed by legislative enactments. We would suppose that education and the diffusion of general intelligence, would correct it, but past experience, contradicts the supposition, our papers are filled with the names of men of education and talents attached to recommendations of nostrums, of the composition, and effects of which they are perfectly ignorant. One mode, and only one remains of correcting the evil, if this fails it is remediless. Let medical men divest the profession of all the mystery in which it has unfortunately been enveloped—too long has the physician been considered the rival of the Juggler. Let them demonstrate that like every other science it is founded on careful observation, that it consists of the accumulated and recorded observations of successive ages, that no man is born a physician, but to acquire this knowledge is the labour of years of unremitting toil. Teach men the functions of their own system, how admirable in design, how complicated in structure, and yet how beautifully adapted in every part to the performance of its own appropriate functions. Then ask them if they are willing to trust the correction of derangements of this beautiful machine, to persons entirely ignorant of its several parts, when a single error may cost them their lives.

To guard against quackery and empiricism out of the profession would not be the only good accomplished by the general diffusion of this knowledge. It would qualify community to judge as to the actual and comparative merits of members of the profession. The modest and unassuming physician would be elevated to his proper station, whilst presumptuous ignorance, whether with or without a diploma, would be consigned to deserved contempt. A knowledge of their own system would enable mankind to guard against many causes of disease to which they are continually subject. To accomplish this as far as possible has ever been a favorite object with the founders of this institution. It has been urged upon her graduates to improve every opportunity of giving popular lectures on Anatomy, Physiology and Hygiene. There are few places where an audience could not be collec-

ted to listen to a lecture on those interesting subjects, and few physicians are so fully occupied during the first years of their practice but they could find ample time for their preparation and delivery. Permit me to repeat to you young gentlemen the recommendation; your leisure hours could not be more profitably employed either for yourselves or the public; and we ask for our Institution no prouder distinction than that her graduates shall be every where known as the pioneers in the great work of reform.

Young Gentlemen, having given satisfactory evidence that you have complied with the requirements of the law, and successfully sustained yourselves under a scrutinizing examination as to your qualifications, you have this day received as the reward of your exertion the highest honours of our Institution. If the acquisition of mere literary honours is of so much moment as justly to be considered an ambition worthy the noblest minds, how much is its importance enhanced when it places in the hands of the recipient—who is clothed by the sovereign authority, through its appointed delegates with the power of using it—an instrument which is to carry healings on its wings, with all the blessings of life and health, or by an improper use be converted into an instrument of disease and death. In this recommendation, for the degree of Doctor of Medicine, and with it all the rights and privileges of practicing your profession,your instructors in a measure, guarantee to the public not only your capacity and attainments, but your integrity and moral worth. Hitherto they have endeavoured in granting the honours of the Institution, faithfully and discreetly to discharge the responsible duty committed to their charge, to guard well the portals of the profession, so that no unworthy member be permitted to enter, and I am happy to say that with very few exceptions, the graduates of this school have proved themselves worthy the confidence reposed in them. You too, gentlemen, are now about to leave the Institution, perhaps for the last time; imagine not however that the tie which binds the literary offspring to his Alma-Mater ceases with the termination of his pupilage; true, the relation of instructor and student has ceased, but think not that this brief parting, this parchment and these testimonials, are to sever the last tie that binds you to the Insti-

tution—on the contrary, you this day become children by adoption.—Henceforth the reputation, the honour, the dignity of the College is identified with your welfare,—think not when you leave these halls that you are forgotten, but remember, if it will be any stimulus to exertion, any solace in the hours of trial, remember, wherever you may be, that the eyes of your professional parents are upon you, rejoicing in your prosperity and sympathising in your sufferings.

Then go persevere in the high and honorable career which you have commenced, remember the sacredness of the trust committed to your charge, and ever practice your profession with a view to that great day when all must render an account of their stewardship. May prosperity and happiness attend you—may the blessings of those who were ready to perish rest upon you,—may the widow and the orphan even in their bereavement, bless you for your benevolent exertions, and above all, may an approving conscience assure you that you have not lived in vain.