

Proposal for the reservation of accidental observations in medicine.

Contributors

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Wellcome Collection
183 Euston Road
London NW1 2BE UK
T +44 (0)20 7611 8722
E library@wellcomecollection.org
<https://wellcomecollection.org>

PROPOSAL
FOR
THE PRESERVATION
OF
ACCIDENTAL OBSERVATIONS
IN
MEDICINE.

IN times beyond the reach of history, the medicinal application of substances could have arisen from no other source than accident. Among articles of the *materia medica* of known origin, we are indebted to accident for some of the most precious.

Accident is every day presenting to different individuals the spectacle of phenomena, arising from uncommon quantities of drugs on the one hand, and on the other, from uncommon conditions of the system, where ordinary powers only have been knowingly or recently applied. What is said of drugs may be extended to natural agents and mental affections.

From conversation with a variety both of medical practitioners and unprofessional observers, the author of this proposal is persuaded that such authentic occurrences only, as have presented themselves to persons now living would, if they could be brought together, compose a body of fact, so instructive to the philosopher, and useful to the physician, that he despairs of finding a term worthy to characterize it.

In some cases, the influence of unsuspected powers would be detected. In others, resources available to the purpose of restoring health in desperate situations would be directly presented, or could be detected by a short and easy process of reasoning. Some anomalous observations, by shewing the absence or agepey of contested causes, would perform the office of *experimenta crucis*—Unusual affections

occur of which an exact account would be among the means of removing from physic its opprobrious uncertainty: an uncertainty frequently depending upon our inability to distinguish the subtler differences in cases which resemble each other in their grosser features.

No striking fact can be accurately stated, in conjunction with its antecedent and concomitant circumstances, without improving our acquaintance with human nature. Our acquisitions in this most important branch of knowledge, may be compared to a number of broken series, of which we have not always more than one or two members. But every new accession bids fair to fill up some deficiency; and a large supply would contribute towards connecting series apparently independent, and working up the whole into one grand all-comprehending chain.

There are complaints, and those by far too frequent, where no known process has a claim to the title of *remedial*. Here the whole chance of preservation depends on the physician's capability of bringing together facts that have heretofore stood remote. But no power of combination can avail where there are no ideas to combine.

Every new observation therefore, may be considered as a standard trunk, sending forth analogies as so many branches crowned with blossoms, some of which cannot fail to be succeeded by salutary fruits. And were it not absurd to extend the illustration of so plain a point, it might be added, that when by the continual interposition of new trunks, the branches are brought near together, the produce of each will be ennobled by the action of their respective principles of fecundation.

Whenever the author has been able to obtain certain information concerning any unusual appearance in animal nature, it has been his custom to preserve it; and among his papers he has memorandums which prove that to our present circumscribed ideas concerning the dose of medicines may be sometimes imputed failures in practice; that certain signs are not to be taken in the received signification; and that many measures are adopted or omitted to the detriment of invalids, because it is assumed that circumstances are necessarily connected which may exist separately, or that one given natural operation is inconsistent with another, to which it may really be synchronous or next in order.

Affiduous observation of the daily states of the human microcosm will be the unfailing consequence of attention to its striking phenomena. Such is the progress of curiosity. Such the origin of all the sciences. The more uniformly clear the sky under which they tended their flocks, the less likely were the shepherds of Chaldæa, to found the science of the stars. And however the disposition to study astronomy might have been strengthened by the coincidence between the heliacal rising of Sirius and the overflowing of the Nile, it must, I conceive, have been awakened by the aspect of comets and eclipses.

Whatever minute and authentic information this imperfect statement may produce, as soon as it shall amount to a certain mass, the author will present it to the public arranged. He flatters himself that no correspondent will eke out by supposition the defect of genuine observation, without clearly distinguishing the one from the other. He still more confidently hopes that none will be instigated by this advertisement to exercise his invention in the manner of Psalmanazar and Chatterton. Whether any literary forgery can be innocent is questioned—but a forged medical report is a drawn dagger which the arm of a credulous physician may any day plunge into the heart of his defenceless patient. The author has heard some inconsiderate wits avow, that they have transmitted to the venders of quack medicines imaginary cures, attested by fictitious signatures; and it is not without apprehension from the propensity of men to display ingenuity and to relate wonders that he announces the present design. But he shall be on his guard, and hopes to baffle attempts at imposition.

THOMAS BEDDOES.

RODNEY-PLACE, Clifton, June 1800.

