

An introductory address delivered at the Westminster Hospital Medical School on Wednesday, October 2nd, 1889 / by Phineas S. Abraham.

Contributors

Abraham, P. S. 1847-1921.
Royal College of Surgeons of England

Publication/Creation

[London?] : Printed by request, [1889?]

Persistent URL

<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/utw79vux>

Provider

Royal College of Surgeons

License and attribution

This material has been provided by This material has been provided by The Royal College of Surgeons of England. The original may be consulted at The Royal College of Surgeons of England. where the originals may be consulted. This work has been identified as being free of known restrictions under copyright law, including all related and neighbouring rights and is being made available under the Creative Commons, Public Domain Mark.

You can copy, modify, distribute and perform the work, even for commercial purposes, without asking permission.



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

5

AN
INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS

DELIVERED AT THE
WESTMINSTER HOSPITAL MEDICAL SCHOOL

ON WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 2nd, 1889.

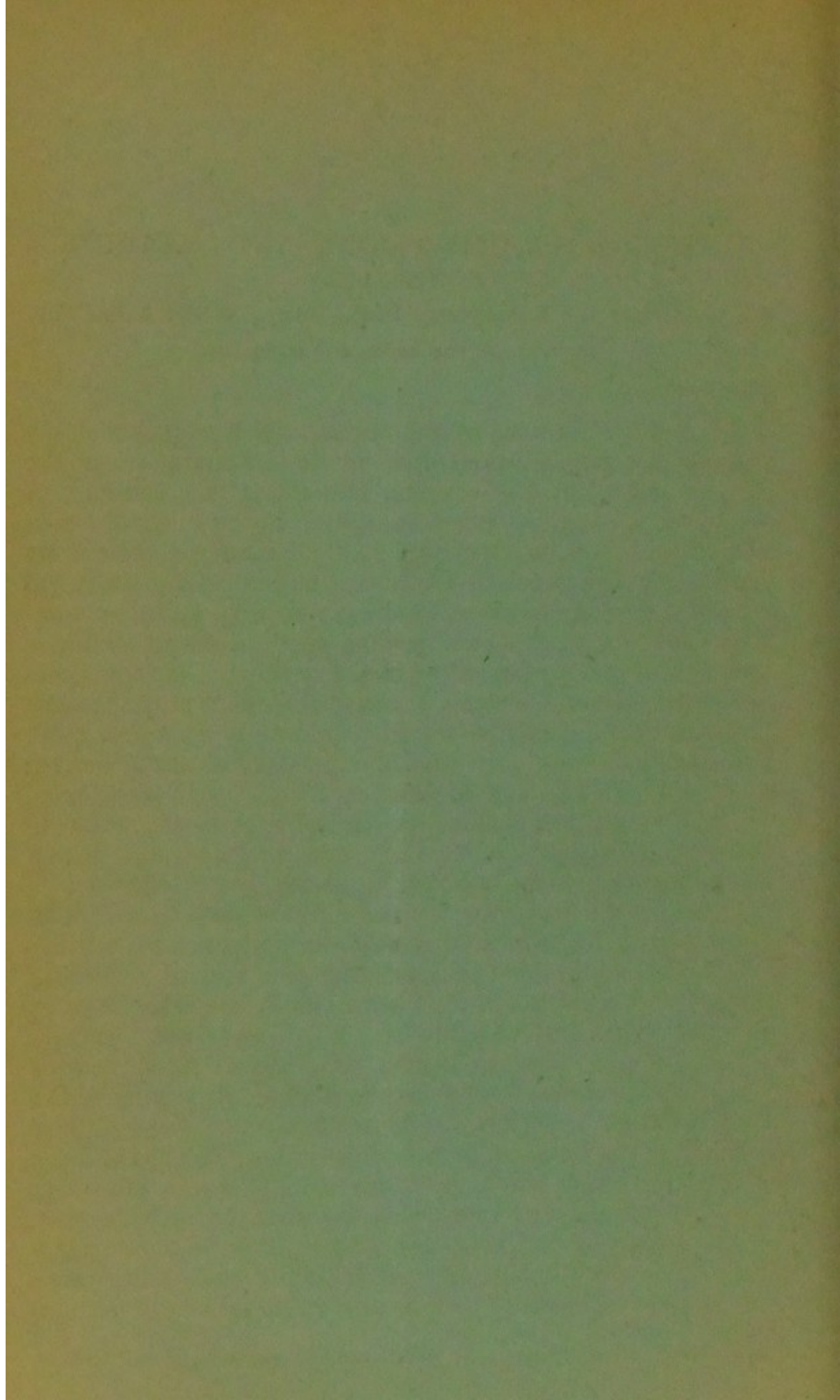
BY
PHINEAS S. ABRAHAM,

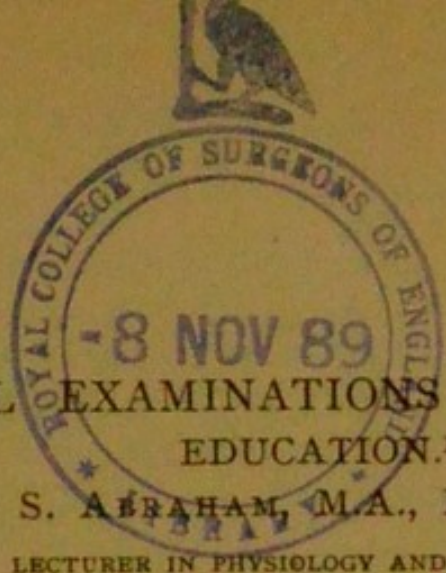
M.A., M.D., B.Sc., F.R.C.S.I.

(Lecturer in Physiology and Histology.)

[PRINTED BY REQUEST.]







MEDICAL EXAMINATIONS AND MEDICAL
EDUCATION.¹

BY PHINEAS S. ABRAHAM, M.A., M.D., B.Sc., F.R.C.S.I.,
LECTURER IN PHYSIOLOGY AND HISTOLOGY.

GENTLEMEN,—

I AM duly conscious of the undeserved honour which my colleagues have conferred upon me in entrusting to me the duty of delivering the opening address at this school. A few years ago nearly every institution in the kingdom connected with medical teaching had its inaugural ceremony during the first week of October, but like many other old customs, this one has been gradually waning, and now comparatively few of the metropolitan medical schools besides our own are opening the session 1889-90 in the time-honoured fashion. From my personal feelings at the present moment I cannot help saying that I sincerely wish that these functions had been quite abolished; but from another point of view—such as I should take up if any other member of the staff were now speaking instead of myself—I must confess that I do approve of such annual gatherings, which bring us all together—teachers, students, and friends.

The speakers on these occasions have been more than once twitted for enunciating well-worn platitudes; for repeating *ad nauseam* the admitted fact that the medical profession is a noble one; for telling their hearers what they all know—that they ought to be “good boys,” etc.; and for inflicting upon them generally what have been termed “fruitless harangues.” I refuse to believe that the words of wisdom which many of you must have heard from my distinguished predecessors in this honourable office have been altogether thrown away. At any rate, if these addresses were in your opinion all nonsense, you would not, I presume, be so foolish as to come and listen to them again. Yet there are present here to-day second, third, and fourth-year’s men, and others even more senior, some of whom perhaps

¹ Introductory Address at the Westminster Hospital Medical School.

do not consider it an absolute waste of time—although it is possible, of course, that they may have some reason to change their minds within the next few minutes !

But I see before me, also, faces which are not familiar, and to you, gentlemen, new students who are to-day making your entry into the profession, I hope that my remarks will not, at all events, appear too stale.

First of all, on behalf of the staff, I desire most cordially to welcome you within these walls. In choosing the Westminster Hospital as your *alma mater* I believe you have done well. This is a small school, and there will be, at any rate, no fear of your being lost here in a crowd ; but coming, as you necessarily will do, into close contact with all your teachers, everyone of you may command more personal assistance from them than would be possible, except for a favoured few, in any of the large schools. When, moreover, your time for bed-side work arrives, you will reap the great advantage which the Westminster Hospital affords of an abundance of clinical material in proportion to the number of its students.

I have had some experience of other schools and hospitals, and I have no hesitation in saying that I know of no institution in which the general “form” of the students is better than it is at the present time at the Westminster. Indeed, as I have heard it remarked, there is an atmosphere of work about the place, which makes it quite uncomfortable for the deliberate idler !

Although I may be allowed to suggest that the teaching may have had something to do with it, it is, I think, in a great measure on account of this high professional *morale* of our school that the Dean has been enabled to present to us to-day such a favourable report of the successes of our students at the examining boards. I have reason to believe that no medical school in London can show better, or probably even so good results.

From a calculation which our excellent secretary, Mr. Green, has been good enough to make, it appears that from July, 1887, to the present date, 426 distinct examinations have been attempted by our men at the various boards, and that the percentage of passes has been no less than 77.23. The figures for the conjoint examinations of the Colleges of

Physicians and Surgeons have been particularly satisfactory, showing for the past two sessions very close upon 80 per cent. of successes. Of course some subjects may be more difficult to pass in than others, but I may be pardoned if I allude to the fact that the gentlemen who have done me the honour to attend my courses have well kept up the reputation of the school, with a record of 83 per cent. of passes in physiology. I may mention that there has been no attempt here to prevent the weaker men from presenting themselves at the public examinations, or to allow only those to go in who might be likely to get through.

We all know that the great aim of the average medical student is to pass his examinations and to get qualified as soon as possible. This, of course, is quite natural ; and I maintain that it should be the constant endeavour of his teachers to assist him in every way to this end. The young doctor will soon find, however, that there is much beyond the final examination, and that a man who has just passed through his school—although he may have conscientiously mastered his text-books and learnt a great deal practically and theoretically about the cases which he has seen or helped in treating in hospital—is really not very far over the threshold of even existing medical knowledge. Medicine, moreover, is progressive ; and the competent practitioner who is to do his patients justice, and to keep abreast of the times in information of disease, must be always exercising afresh his faculties of observation and of judgment, and constantly watching the results of others—always, in short, learning. It is, indeed, an old and true saying that a physician who is worthy of the name must be a student until the end of his career.

Your teachers have to bear these facts in mind ; and we must not be content with merely “cramming” you for examinations, but must try to equip you with methods of thought and research, as well as with principles and facts, which will be of value to you in the future.

The power of accurately seeing and interpreting natural phenomena can only be acquired by long training and practice, and the modern medical curriculum is, in some measure, calculated to promote the development of the student's faculties. For instance, apart from their direct bearing on

surgery and medicine, what better training in minute observation, and in arriving at conclusions where the data are not always clear, can there be than in the proper practical study of Anatomy and Physiology?

In the excellent address to which many of us here present had the pleasure of listening last year, Mr. Stonham showed how very faulty our medical education still is in many respects. In most of his strictures I heartily agree. It cannot be too often insisted upon that it is deplorable to see men aspiring to become members of a profession which should be preëminently scientific, and which should be second in culture to none in the land, who not alone are totally ignorant when they enter the medical school of the elementary laws of nature, but who, in some cases, have received but a very imperfect general education. I think, with Mr. Stonham, that no student who is unable to matriculate at the University of London, or to pass an examination of approximately that standard, should be allowed to enter the profession; and I would go further, and recommend that all students, before commencing their special medical studies, should also be compelled to show a substantial knowledge of the principles, especially of chemistry and physics—the sciences, namely, which ultimately underlie the phenomena of health and disease, of life and death, and upon which many of the important subjects of the curriculum are themselves mainly based. I would, moreover, second my friend in his suggestion that the medical course be extended to at least five years; for while the branches of our technical education have been multiplied, and the range of each one has been enormously extended, the time allotted to their study alone has not been officially increased for many years. It may be objected, of course, that if the conditions were made so much more onerous, the supply of candidates for the profession would be materially diminished. But would this be an unmixed evil?

Attention has been frequently called of late to the fact that there are already too many practitioners of medicine, and it is becoming well known that it is impossible for them all to make a livelihood by their calling. Within the last year certain statistics bearing upon the question have been published by a committee of the General Medical Council.

It is thereby shown that while the rate of increase of population in England, during the years 1881-86, has been estimated at 1.4 per cent. per annum, the increase of registered practitioners has been at the rate of 2.42 per cent. It is stated that "the net increase of the profession in England during the quinquennium was no less than 826 beyond what was requisite to keep pace with the population, showing an annual excess above average requirements of more than 150." In some places, especially, the plethora of medical men is very great: thus it appears that in 1886 London contained 1943 registered practitioners over and above its due share. If, however, the fully-fledged doctors are as thick as blackberries, the would-be Æsculapians are still more numerous. The average number of registrations per annum of qualified men in Great Britain and Ireland, for the five years ending December, 1888, was 1382, while the corresponding figure for entering medical students, who registered during the same period, was as much as 1921 per annum, and the cry is, "still they come." I do not adduce these figures to discourage you, but I think they forcibly point to two conclusions: (1) That if competition has been severe in the past, it is certain to be still more so in the near future; and (2) that you will all have the greater need for steady work, and for making the most of your opportunities—from the very start—if you are to succeed in the struggle!

I have jotted down some of the qualities which various authorities have stated to be essential to the success of a medical man. First of all there are the four Hippocratic attributes: learning, sagacity, humanity, and probity; and, among a host of others, enthusiasm, diligence and perseverance, reverence, zeal and industry, self-discipline, punctuality and tact, skill, a power to persuade, intention, attention and intensity, integrity, purity and honesty, faith, character, truthfulness, health, hard study, close and diligent observation, a sober and righteous life, humility, sympathy, tolerance of wrong, independence, a strong sense of duty, chivalry, "a love of the profession," and "a readiness to pay a heavy premium in this world for the prospects of reward in the next." I could enumerate a great many more; but perhaps these are enough, gentlemen, to indicate to you what paragons of excellence you must be!

It is true that we occasionally hear of some individual of imperfect education in his work, who has not demonstrated, to his professional colleagues at least, the possession of very many of the above characteristics, attaining by "push," or with adventitious aid, to the position of a so-called "fashionable physician," and gaining a certain amount of reputation among the uninstructed, who cannot detect the fraud. But such instances are, perhaps, uncommon. Considering, indeed, the gullibility of a large section of the public, as evidenced by its unbounded trust in everything which is sufficiently advertised, it is a matter for surprise that the humbug and the charlatan are not more to the fore.

The fact that quacks, in this country at all events, have to hold their heads low speaks well for the growing enlightenment of public opinion. As may be expected, however, the lower class of journalists will sometimes insert, even in the form of articles in the body of the paper, any nonsense for which they are paid, or which they imagine will increase the circulation of their sheets; and in this manner many ignorant persons who still pin their faith upon all they read in the newspapers are frequently duped for the pecuniary benefit of purveyors of universal nostrums and such like. Occasionally, also, we find more reputable journals—probably, no doubt, in all innocence—lending themselves to the self-assertive masked advertisement of some such shady representative of the profession, as I have just alluded to; but is it not astonishing to see, as I did a year or two ago, one of our leading London illustrated papers furthering the interests of a notorious quack by publishing his portrait, with a laudatory biography, and giving, as it were, the stamp of its authority to his unblushingly-absurd allegations. All this may be beneath our notice; but the fact remains that while many a competent practitioner is struggling to 'make two ends meet,' fees which, legitimately, should go to him, find their way into the pockets of unscrupulous adventurers, who thrive on the public credulity and to the general detriment.

Although we conform to the regulations of, and pay considerable sums of money to, Corporations and Councils, which are supposed to have the interests of the medical profession in their keeping, it is apparently for the most

part left, as some recent instances testify, to private individuals to go to the expense and trouble of showing up such impostors.

It is satisfactory, however, and only fair, to say that the great organs of public opinion at the present day, show a due appreciation of the rôle of our profession, and are not sparing in their acknowledgments of what a London morning journal has recently called "the inestimable services rendered to mankind by physicians and surgeons"—whom it describes as "that true Legion of Honour, the members of which, officers and men alike, lead noble lives indeed, dedicated to the alleviation of suffering, to the prolongation of human existence, and to the improvement of the physical conditions in which that existence has to be passed."

When we are helping the sick, or trying to elucidate a problem which may in some way lead to the advance of medical knowledge, we are not thinking of what people will say; but nevertheless such words as those I have just read are some encouragement in our work!

The 'barber-surgeon' is long since extinct, and the hybrid medical tradesman is (or should be) becoming obsolete; the physician of to-day is no longer a mere prescriber of pills and not simply a 'coprogogue,' nor is the surgeon nothing but a 'lopper of limbs' and only worthy of the name of 'Saw-bones.' Voltaire's often quoted *dictum*—that a medical man was one "who poured drugs of which he knew little into a body of which he knew less"—is, indeed, not quite so true now as it was.

We can look with pride at the enormous and steady improvement in the public health, wherever the modern doctor has had his say; we can point to the fact that London—this seething cauldron of human beings—is the healthiest city in the world (in spite of the profusion of doctors!) as a concrete result of the attention paid to the advice of sanitarians.

I have heard a place described by my friend, the Rev. Dr. Haughton, as being so salubrious that nobody could die there. When the very old inhabitants wanted to throw off the mortal coils of this existence they had to go into the next parish! This, however, is not a general experience. We have, indeed, a huge continent of unknown facts in the

causation, prevention, and treatment of disease yet before us for exploration. The points of attack are many, and are obvious ; and there are plenty of willing and able hands for the work—now, and when you, gentlemen, will be ready for the fray ; but the sinews of war, which are as necessary in this campaign as in any other, may be sometimes wanting. It must be admitted that in recent years the State has more and more recognised its obligations to the public weal, and has done much for the science of health, but a great deal is still left to private effort and to individual generosity. We have had to await the initiation, by H.R.H. the Prince of Wales and his Damien Committee, of a much-needed crusade of investigation against one of the terrible scourges of mankind ; and we have had to leave gaps in the full knowledge of one of our chief therapeutic aids until an enlightened Indian prince comes forward and handsomely defrays the cost of its adequate re-examination. May some of our Croesuses nearer home take a hint from his splendid example !

You must excuse me if I take this opportunity of entering a plea for the more thorough study by students of the subject which it is my privilege to teach in this School. We know that the object of most of you in coming here is not to qualify yourselves to become specialists in physiology ; and it is also manifest that the time at your disposal for acquiring a real and practical knowledge of such a subject is very limited. We can, indeed, do little more than set you on the way of learning the principles of this, and of many other branches of the curriculum, or than show you how to profit by what you learn hereafter. I am afraid, however, that physiology is not as popular as it might be with the general run of medical students. [N.B.—I do not refer particularly to the pupils of this School, for as we have seen, from an examinational point of view, at all events, our men have not neglected the subject.] This state of affairs, I believe, is partly because men do not seem to grasp the fact that physiology does not consist merely of tables of constituents, series of functions, divergent theories, etc., to be learnt off by heart, but that it is a young science, the data of which are being arrived at by observation and experiment. If students gave as much time and attention

to the *things* which are demonstrated to them in the lecture-room and the laboratory, as they do to the *names* which they labour over to commit to memory from their "cram" books, they would not find the subject so very dry. We must remember that the processes of health and disease are not different in kind; they are the effects of the same chemical and physical laws, manifesting themselves under somewhat different conditions. It may truly be said, indeed, that physiology and pathology are part and parcel of one science; there is no distinct line of demarcation between them. There can be no doubt that our knowledge of pathology can be but little advanced except through knowledge and by the methods of physiology. We may safely predict that it will be to the well-trained physiological mind that many of the unsolved problems of disease will the easier and the more surely yield.

It has been said that students can hardly be expected to pay attention to advice which emanates from comparatively young men, or from any, indeed, but the distinguished seniors and pillars of wisdom of our profession. This may be; but a younger man may have a more vivid recollection than his elders of the difficulties of his student days, and a more practical acquaintance with the conditions of student-life of the present generation. At any rate, I shall venture to offer to you some suggestions founded on my experience.

There is considerable difference of opinion among students and others as to the "value" of attending lectures. It obviously all depends upon two things: (1) the lectures and (2) the way they are attended. I can only say that I myself learnt a great deal from lectures, and some of my old note-books are to this day to me more or less useful compendiums of information. I can remember, moreover, that I used to find them very trusty friends indeed on the eve of my examinations! Let me advise you to take down the gist of what the lecturer says. If he knows his business, he will methodise for you the facts of the subject, will emphasise the more important points, and, depend upon it, materially help you to get the best value from your text-books, and from your cases. The art of taking good notes can of course only be acquired by experience; but one soon falls into the way by a little practice. Always correct them when you go

home. Sketch all that you can see (there is no need to finish your pictures to the standard of the Royal Academy); a very rough outline will do. Everyone ought to be able to delineate what he sees in some kind of way, and if he cannot the sooner he begins to learn the better. One remembers more or less permanently what one puts down and sees for one's self far better than what one learns by rote from a book. Use your ears, your eyes, your hands—in fact, all your senses if necessary, and satisfy yourselves in every way, as far as you can, that what you read or are told is correct. As I have hinted before, men depend too much upon learning pages of text-books by heart rather than upon tackling their work in a practical manner. There is one recommendation that I desire to urge. Many of you will find out when it is too late—and will possibly have reason to deplore the omission—that you have made a mistake in not, at an early period of your course, having taken steps to obtain a university degree. You must have observed, in the medical papers, the never-ending controversies over the coveted, although sometimes empty, title of “Doctor.” For various reasons—time, money, etc.—the older universities may be inaccessible to some of you, but under the new regulations there will be nothing but a little extra work to prevent any man of ordinary intelligence from attaining to a London degree. Let me strongly advise those who have not already done so to matriculate as soon as possible.

I have said that I profited much from the lectures of my student days. One of the lecturers to whom I owe a debt of gratitude is the brilliant man of science, the Professor of Anatomy now of the University of Cambridge, who is occupying the chair on this occasion. I cannot say before him all I would, and could, of Professor Macalister; nor need I detail to you all that he has done for anatomy—that solid ground of our craft—for most of you here are doubtless acquainted with his work. But I must express the peculiar pleasure which I feel in seeing my respected teacher preside in this room to-day.

I have wearied you enough. For your kind patience in listening to my crude and rambling remarks I thank you sincerely. I have one request to make. I ask you to join me in wishing success to the School of the Westminster Hospital!

