

# **The speculum : its moral tendencies / by a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons.**

## **Contributors**

Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons.  
Royal College of Surgeons of England

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T +44 (0)20 7611 8722  
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THE SPECULUM:

ITS MORAL TENDENCIES.

BY

A FELLOW OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF  
SURGEONS.

LONDON:

BOSWORTH AND HARRISON, 215, REGENT STREET.

1857.

ERRATA

Page 3, line 8, for "their" read "is"

Page 2, line 1, for "it is" read "they are"

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# THE SPECULUM:

## ITS MORAL TENDENCIES.

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If the readiness with which the public accepts and acts upon the suggestions of science, may be admitted as a proof of their advancement in knowledge, the present generation has made rapid strides indeed. For it cannot be said of the philosophers of our day that, like Bacon and Gallileo, they are living before their times; on the contrary, the times are quite up with them. Whatever new doctrine they wish to propound, whatever new theory to establish, they find ready listeners; their discoveries are no longer pooh-pooed, and the benefits likely to flow from them reserved for future generations; their promises are accepted with a confidence that should attach only to performances, for the lens and the crucible have familiarised the public mind with wonder, whilst the rail and the electric wire have entirely dissipated its belief in impossibility. Hence, it has become, as Cæsar said of the Gauls, *appetens*

*novarum rerum*, and this desire is fully equalled by its credulity.

Thus science, strange as it may appear, has been made to prepare the way for empiricism, for that, which one would have thought it had been its especial mission to eradicate. Not for the empiricism of former times, not for the quack salver with his cart in the market-place, nor for the humourous impostors of the Dulcamara school, but for an empiricism of a far more dangerous character, that lies like truth, and finds its professors amongst the alumni of our colleges.

I speak not now of the hydropath, nor of the homœopath, distressing as the results of their pretensions frequently are, but of men, who, secured in the confidence of the public by the possession of their diplomas, and within the pale of the profession, are now rising into fame and fortune by the indiscriminate use of the speculum.

Were fame and fortune, however, the only results, were the public simply gulled, there would be nothing in its consequences to take this imposition out of the ordinary category. But, unfortunately, this is not the case, the practices of these men leave results of a far more serious and lasting character, not to be sought for amongst material things, but in the lowered and

loosened state to which it is rapidly bringing the morality of the country.

This is a strong assertion, but not stronger than the facts that support it. The profession is well aware of the baleful tendency of the proceedings of these men, whilst they deplore their inability to prevent or to expose them. Scarcely a member of it whom you meet, but has a tale to tell of their practices, which, if made public, would bring the mighty from their seats; but there is too much indecency involved in the disclosure, to allow of its publicity. Thus are they doubly hedged; their diploma checks suspicion, whilst the nature of their performances secures them secrecy.

To believe in the necessity for this constant and general use of the speculum, is to admit a sad deterioration in nature itself. Either this, or that anterior generations were great sufferers without being aware of it. Perhaps, like the Spartan boy, they endured in silence, rather than betray a want of courage, or what was more laudable, a want of delicacy.

But I do not believe in this; I believe the workmanship of the Creator to be as perfect now as of yore, and that the modern and multitudinous disorders attributed to the uterine system, are

wicked inventions, put forth to sanction unnecessary interference. Why, if we are to believe these men, there is scarcely a patient who applies to them, that is not suffering from one or the other of these numerous affections. The womb, with them, is so invariably out of order or out of position, that disease and dislocation are more constant than its normal conditions. Young or old, married or single, whatever their age, whatever their condition, the same opinion, the same treatment, varied only in the selection of the instrument. No matter what the complaint, or what the ailment, the *fons et origo mali*, is declared to be the uterus; upon it, as upon the scapegoat of the Israelites, are laid all the imperfections of the body corporate. Oh, that, like its prototype, it had the power of escaping with them unharmed into the wilderness!

Nor are these practices confined to the high priests in these temples of immorality, faith in their professions now pervades a large portion of female society; like the flame in a stubble field, the mania has spread, the convert quickly becomes the proselyte, and the consequence is, that some men in the general practice of our profession, are induced to shape their treatment less by the nature of the complaints, than the sugges-

tions of their patients. I do remember an apothecary is, unfortunately, as applicable in many instances now, as in the days of Romeo. It is the poverty and not the will, and the fear, nay, almost the certainty, of loosing their patients, compel such men to place their interests above their honour, and to adopt a course of action that common sense, as well as common honesty, condemns.

The result of this can be easily imagined; unskilfulness is associated with fraud. The speculum is brought into play, and startling are the revelations made by its glittering wall. Alarmed or amused, no matter which, the patient is secured, and remains long enough under treatment to familiarise her with indecency, and to enable the prenticed hand of the neophyte to attain the *tour de maître* both in handling the instrument and the fee.

Butler tells us that—

“The pleasure is as great  
Of being cheated as to cheat;”

and that there are amongst the female community some to whom these practices are not objectionable, is possible. The profession was well acquainted before the introduction of the speculum, with what beastly minuteness, to use the phrase of a distinguished lecturer, some



patients would dwell upon the ailments incidental to the sex, and who seemed to rejoice in the existence of them, since it afforded an excuse for their description; concerning them, I have nothing to say, except that I regret the uses to which they have been able to pervert the profession. By such, the introduction of the speculum may be regarded as a God-send; but there are others, by far the majority, who look upon it in a very different manner, only submitting to its use, from the firm assurances given by the operator, that it is essential to their recovery. That the credulity of such persons should be practised on is painful in the extreme; and yet, when we consider the uniformity of the opinions given, and of the treatment adopted by these men, we cannot help thinking that it has been so—that like Iphigenia, they have been sacrificed to raise the wind.

That this practice is becoming more and more general every day is easily confirmed by a visit to our instrument maker's shops; there the speculum is to be seen in every variety and in every direction, like weeds in the garden, overtopping every wholesome thing; their counters and their windows are filled with them; they are ranged in a crescendo order along their shelves like reeds in a Pandean pipe, and could our professors be per-

suaded to turn them to a similar use, their gains would be more honourable, whilst their patients would derive equal benefit.

Then if anything more is wanted besides their universal aptitude to stamp these practices with suspicion, it is the never-varying time fixed for the recovery of the patients. Who, before this, ever heard of a period being fixed for the cure of any disorder? Yet here it is as accurately defined as that between seed-time and harvest; and, by the by, it is generally of about of that duration. In that time the cure is usually declared complete. The giants have been created and killed, the humours are dried up, and the dove returns no more unto the ark.\*

Then again these uterine complaints, contrary to the laws that govern local affections are made to assume an almost epidemic character, for it is by no means uncommon to hear that several members of the same household are under treatment, as they call it, at the same time.

The uniformity, too, of this treatment, that I have before alluded to, is not the least remarkable circumstance that attends this practice; if they were inanimate things, to which their appliances are made; if the subjects of them partook of the changeless character of inorganic life, instead of

\* See Appendix.

possessing that of the most highly organized, they could not be more unvarying; they might be stereotyped, like the regulations of our navy, that are alike applicable to the armaments of the new gun-boats, the trim frigate, and the crazy old seventy-four.

But besides those whom I have mentioned as abusing the speculum there are others, who, more honest, yet not the less dangerous, are unconsciously perhaps, contributing their share to this work of demoralisation; I mean that portion of the profession who, unable to form opinions for themselves, are ready at all times *jurare in verba magistri* adopting any practice provided the example be set in high places. The simplicity of such men is more dangerous perhaps than the astuteness of those they imitate, and this is not the first time that society has been likely to suffer from it. We were exposed to a similar danger from the disciples of the Malthusian school, who, referring every social evil to surplus population, were prepared to check it by such practises as must have radically demoralised all that remained. Carried away by their newly accepted theories, they are impatient of reflection, and common sense toils after them in vain; like the will-o'-the-wisp, their borrowed light shines only to mislead, and

their deluded victims see not the slough until they are irretrievably lost within it; like the fly-wheel of an engine they are unconscious of the vast machinery they set in motion. With these men one would like to deal charitably; but the best of motives must not be allowed to compensate the consequences of dangerous acts; they must not be allowed to jeopardise the modesty of the sex so long the pride and the property of England.

That an instrument capable in its application of such wide-spreading mischief, should possess some compensating good, some power whereby diseases, hitherto obscure and intractable, should be compelled to render up the morbid secrets on which they rest, and to take their place amongst curable disorders was to have been expected, and had this been so, the case would stand far differently; to withhold it, then, from false notions of delicacy, would be as culpable as is its universal application by those who labour under no such restraints.

There is no indecency in that which is done in behalf of suffering humanity; at her call all base ideas fly, and the area around the bed as around the operating table, becomes as sacred as the precincts of the altar, whilst those who operate and

those who assist, are actuated, like the good Samaritan, with but one feeling—the desire to do good. But unfortunately this is not the case; the diseases here alluded to, though obnoxious to its application, instead of being benefited are materially aggravated by its use; take, for instance, the schirrous affections, in these cases its use is not only inefficacious, but positively injurious—it only adds torture to torment. These diseases defy the present state of our knowledge, and that knowledge is not likely to be advanced by such proceedings.

The advocates of the speculum attach great importance to the power that it gives them of bringing the parts affected under the cognizance of the eye. Seeing, we are told, is believing, and in most instances truth is on the side of the adage; but in the investigation of uterine diseases this sense is not so comprehensive and infallible as one might be led to suppose. Through it alone we can, I know, obtain a knowledge of the colour of the parts; but this, like the hues in the kaleidoscope, is materially influenced by the movements conveyed to the instrument by the hand, the slightest pressure produces interruption of the capillary circulation, and temporary congestion and discoloration are the misleading consequences.

Tenderness and hardness, two conditions greatly

influencing our treatment and prognosis in these affections, are not detected by it, whilst the knowledge gathered from it of irregularity of surface or breach of structure, is only a duplicate of that already obtained by the sense of touch. The information it conveys, compared with that derived from the latter sense, is very limited, and cases in which we require their mutual aid for our guidance are rare in the extreme.

To that large and important class of disorders known under the name of tumours of the uterus, it is as inapplicable as a remedial, as it is unnecessary as a diagnostic agent.

Driven thus from the field of real disease, these advocates of the speculum are obliged to invest with a false character ailments that the profession has hitherto regarded as too trifling to admit of any save the simplest treatment. Discharges scarcely deserving the name of leucorrhœa, and so common as almost to be accepted as natural, are magnified by them into serious affections, and consequences predicated that alarm the patient into a lengthened attendance. Hysteria, too, with all that nervous disturbance, so common amongst the wealthy and unemployed, is pressed into their service, and declared alone susceptible of cure by the speculum, and the mop and the caustic are

applied to alleviate the effects of an exalted imagination.

Of its use in that mysterious ulceration of late so general, which is said to have its whereabouts in the epithelion of the os uteri, and to retain its hold with such untiring tenacity, of whose presence or departure the patient is alike ignorant, till informed of it by others, I am unable to speak; it is a modern affection—it came in with the speculum, and one cannot but admire the kindness of nature in making the bane and the antidote to appear thus simultaneously amongst us.

The speculum has been greatly extolled as the means of conveying appliances immediately to the parts affected. But it must not be forgotten that the effects of local remedies in constitutional affections are short-lived in the extreme, or that those can hardly be called remedies, that are notoriously so slow in their operation, as to leave it doubtful whether they have not, after all, been robbing time of the merit of the recovery.

That the profession is silent on these abuses is, in my opinion, to be deplored. Such silence may arise from the fear that the denunciation of them would tend to lower it in the estimation of the public, more than the continuance of the abuses

themselves. Yielding to none in the desire to uphold the dignity of my order, I must say that I share in no such apprehensions. The public, in return for the confidence they repose in us, have a right to such protection, and if they find that it has been withheld, that, in a mistaken solicitude for our own interests, we have neglected theirs, they will bind us all up in one common withe together, and the diploma, though it may still indicate the man of science, will cease to insure us the position of gentlemen.



## APPENDIX.

Since writing the above I have seen Dr. Rigby's late work on the Constitutional Treatment of Diseases of Women, in which I find much to corroborate the truth of what I have written. The Doctor speaks of the "dishonest" application of caustic; and in a note he says, "I am justified in using the word *dishonest*, a large number of cases having come under my notice where severe uterine irritation has been produced with chronic induration of the part and serious injury to the general health, without the evidence from the patient's history to have justified the use of caustic at all. In some cases which I have seen, only a few hours after the application, the os uteri was *perfectly* sound, except the ash-coloured spot produced by the caustic."

Again, when speaking of the supposed frequency of the ulceration of the os and cervix, he says, "It presents an instance of delusion as discreditable to the candour of the practitioner as to the common sense of the patient," and further, "that cases had come under his knowledge where caustic had been applied to a perfectly healthy os uteri, and the patient informed that she had 'ulceration.'"