

The ideal physician / W.W. Keen.

Contributors

Keen, William W. 1837-1932.
Royal College of Surgeons of England

Publication/Creation

[Chicago?] : [publisher not identified], [1900]

Persistent URL

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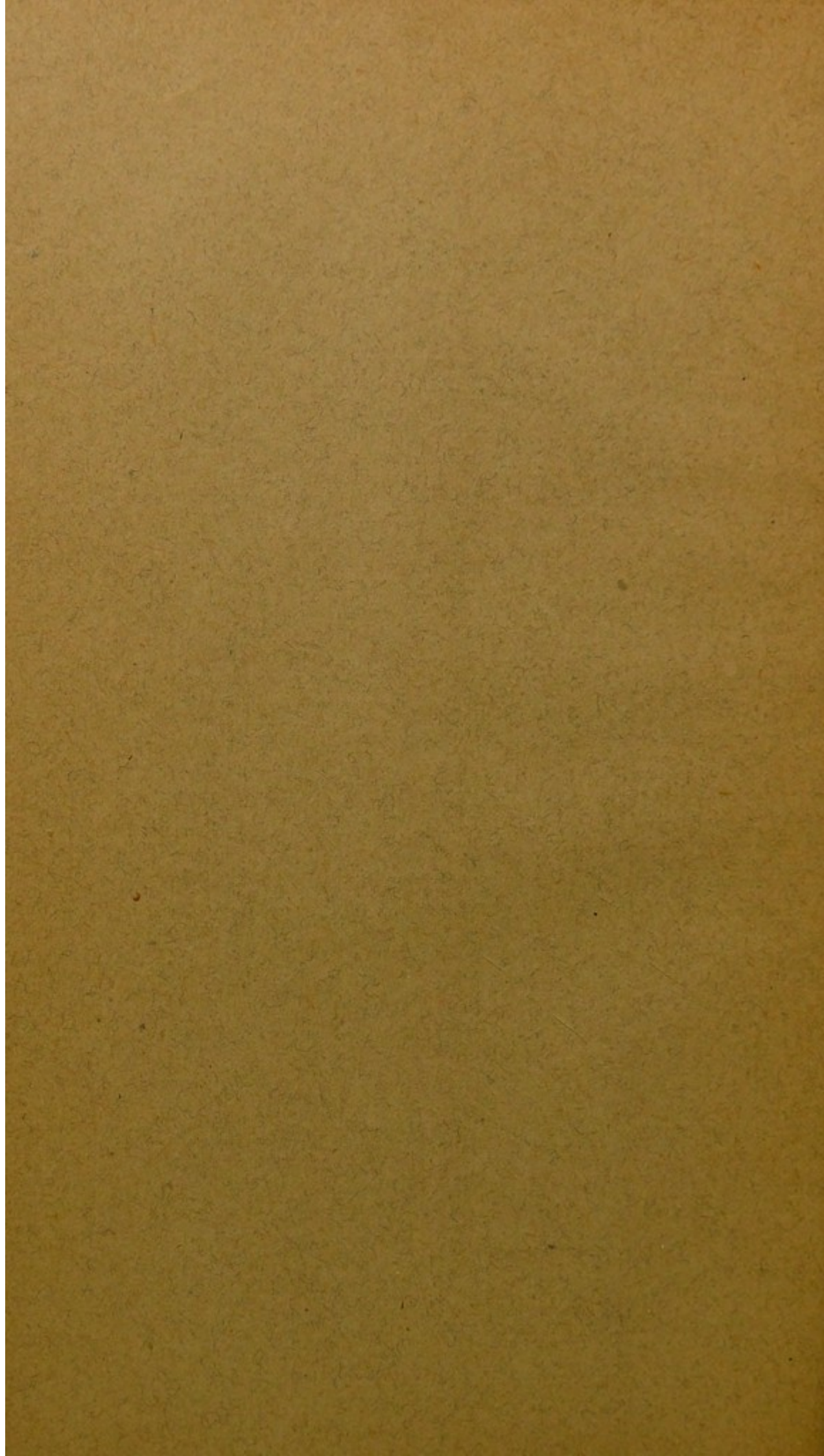
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The Ideal Physician

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W. W. KEEN, M.D., LL.D.
Philadelphia



THE IDEAL PHYSICIAN.*

BY W. W. KEEN, M.D., LL.D.

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PHILADELPHIA.

When casting about for a suitable topic on which to address you, I was much perplexed at first, but finally bethought me that perhaps I could not do you a better service than to sketch in very brief outlines the characteristics of the ideal physician. Let me address you therefore as aspirants for the realization of this ideal.

Few of us, perhaps, at the close of life, can say that we have realized our ideals. But unless we have a high ideal, the trajectory of our life will never have risen to any noble height. "Hitch your wagon to a star," said Ralph Waldo Emerson. Even though you fail you will more nearly reach the firmament than if you had never made the attempt.

The physician may be regarded from three points of view: 1, his personal life; 2, his professional life, and, 3, his public life.

Personal Life.—The ultimate basis of esteem is personal character. Wealth for a time may lend its glamor; intellectual attainments for a time may dazzle the judgment; power for a time may achieve apparent success, but when the testing time comes, as come it must to every man when some great temptation to do wrong confronts him, wealth and intellectual power are as if they were not; character is the one thing that tells in this life and death struggle. Having that, you will win the

*The Commencement Address delivered to the students of Rush Medical College, in affiliation with the University of Chicago, June 21, 1900.

fight and be crowned with the laurel of victory. Wanting that you will succumb, defeated and dishonored. The struggle may be a public temptation known of all men, and if you fall your fall will be like that of Lucifer; or it may be hidden in your own breast, known only to God and yourself; but if you win, the victory is just as great as measured by the eyes of Omnipotence, for a character has been saved and strengthened; a true man has attained his growth.

It is due, I am glad to say, to this prevalence of high character that our profession has won such a lofty place in the esteem of the community. Its purity is almost never impeached. Remember that every time you are alone with a woman-patient in your consulting room, with every eye barred out, she gives her honor into your hands and in turn you place your reputation unreservedly in hers. A whisper will destroy either of you. In my opinion, it is the highest tribute that can be paid to the character of our profession and equally to the credit of our patients that this mutual confidence is so seldom abused and the tongue of scandal is so seldom busied with noxious tales. When you remember that there are over one hundred thousand physicians in this country with daily possibilities of wrong-doing, is it not marvelous that this sacred trust is so jealously conserved?

Greatness of character finds its best expression in kindness. To no one are so many opportunities for this fine trait given as to the physician. In the heyday of health and happiness he is not needed, but when sickness and weariness and woe come, when the bread-winner may be taken, or the loved mother's gentle life may be in peril, or a sweet little child in whom is centered all the tenderness of unbounded love is lying ill, and death seems to dog the doctor's footsteps, then the trusted physician, wise of head and kind of heart, is indeed a welcome visitor. Then can his gentle touch give assurance; then can his sympathetic voice bring hope; then can the thousand and one acts of thoughtful kindness bind to him for life the anxious hearts looking to him as the messenger of life. Even in the daily routine of a hospital clinic, a kind word is often better than any medicine.

Manners make the man. The boor has no place among us. The physician should never be the fop, but always the gentleman; never unclean of clothes or speech, but always neatly dressed and so careful of his words that he need not ask, as did one of General Grant's aids: "There are no ladies present, are there?" "No," was Grant's stinging reply, "but there are several gentlemen." Soiled linen and unclean finger nails are as much condemned by antisepsis as they are by decency. The flavor of stale tobacco smoke about his beard and clothes will never characterize the ideal physician, nor will indulgence in alcohol ever cloud his judgment or disgust his patients.

Make it a point not to let your intellectual life atrophy through non-use. Be familiar with the classics of English literature in prose and verse; read the lives of the great men of the past, and keep pace with modern thought in books of travel, history, fiction, science. A varied intellectual life will give zest to your medical studies and enable you to enter not unequipped into such social intercourse as will beget you friends and will relieve the monotony of a purely medical diet. Let music and art shed their radiance upon your too often weary life and find in the sweet cadences of sound or the rich emotions of form and color a refinement which adds polish to the scientific man.

I suspect the next characteristic of the ideal physician will meet with a ready assent—marry as soon as you can support a wife and the hostages to fortune who will make your home life happy beyond compare. But choose wisely and not too hastily. A bachelor doctor is an anomaly. He can not fully comprehend the hopes and fears and desires of parents. He knows not the lions in the path of childhood. Imagine if you can some sweet lassie confiding to him the symptoms of a heart disease which digitalis can not cure. The ideal physician is a good husband and a good father, and so will he enter into the lives and hearts of parents and children, not as a stranger, but as one who can partake of all their emotions, because he has felt the same joys, partaken of the same sorrows, loved as they have loved, and it may be, drunk to the dregs the same cup of loss.

But the ideal doctor lives also a spiritual life. You

gentlemen will have to deal with the entrance and the exit of life. You must often ask yourself what and whence is this new *ego* that is born into the world; whither goes the spirit when it quits this tabernacle of flesh which is left to moulder and decay. The tremendous problems of life and death are daily put before you for solution. You can not avoid them if you would; they are forced upon you by your daily occupation.

As man to man, may I not ask you to give them that consideration which befits the highest problem that can be presented to any human being. That this life, with its hopes and its joys, its diseases and its disasters is all is denied alike by common sense, by reason, and by revelation. He is the best physician who takes account of the life hereafter as well as the life that now is, and who not only heals the body but helps the soul. Let your lives, therefore, be thoroughly religious, religious in your inmost soul, though often you may be denied its customary outward observances. Then shall character, which was my first postulate for our ideal physician, find expression in an ideal altruistic life.

Professional Life.—The ideal physician is a member of a learned guild. He should be above the tricks and petty jealousies of trade. True, he lives by his profession, but he who practices for gain is only a hireling and not a true shepherd of the sheep. If you would attain, therefore, to this professional ideal, you must be a constant student, keeping abreast of that scientific progress of which in your community you must be the exponent. You must not be satisfied with the knowledge which you now possess, but you must read, especially the medical journals, or you will be left behind in this day of rapid progress. You must know not only your own language, but must be familiar at least by a reading knowledge, with French and German, and if possible with other tongues. He who knows two languages is twice the man he was when he knew only one.

You must not only be skilful, but careful. I have made not a few mistakes in my own professional life, and in reviewing them I can see that for every one made by reason of lack of knowledge and skill, two at least have been committed by haste or want of care. With all our varied instruments of precision, useful as they are,,

nothing can replace the watchful eye, the alert ear, the tactful finger and the logical mind which correlates the facts obtained through all these avenues of information and so reaches an exact diagnosis, institutes a correct treatment and is rewarded by a happy result.

Be careful in your relations to your patients to deal with them conscientiously. In no other calling is the amount of service to be paid for committed absolutely to the judgment and conscience of the person who is to be paid for his services. Whether you shall make few or many visits is left to your discretion and honest judgment. Sordid motives may occasionally lead to the giving of unnecessary attention. But again it is a glory of our guild that very few physicians betray this trust, and those who do quickly lose their professional standing. Watch yourselves jealously in this and never let the greed of gain dull the fine edge of professional honesty.

You will be the father confessor to many a penitent. Family skeletons will be unveiled to you alone. The conscientious duty of professional secrecy is given, I am proud to say, into not unworthy hands. True, physicians are sometimes too lax in the repetition of petty gossip, but the profession as a whole is worthy of the confidences so freely given. Be careful, even to reticence, of any betrayal of this trust. Better suffer misconception and unmerited blame yourselves than betray your patients.

Be brave men. Your fathers were brave men. When pestilence stalks in the streets and contagion lurks in every chamber of illness, where have the doctors been found? Fleeing from danger with the frightened multitude? Nay, verily. If you wish to find them you must seek in the crowded tenements, in the hospitals and in the charnel houses. There you will find them cheerfully tending the sick, facing disease in the midst of its victims and seeking, even in the bodies of the dead, the knowledge that will make them masters of the plague. Witness Rush in the yellow fever of 1797, Gross in the cholera of 1832, Haffkine and Koch in the bubonic plague of the present time. War has given us many fine examples of personal bravery, but pestilence has bred its many quiet heroes who have gone about their daily duty,

simply, fearlessly, devotedly. No granite shaft, no enduring brass may mark their last resting-place, but the Recording Angel has dropped a tear, blotting out their faults, and writ their names high in the roll of fame.

In your professional relations, never forget to be charitable. The best patients you will ever have will be the grateful poor, and your hearts will often find a sincere and grateful glance better payment than any gold. In your relations with other physicians, you will find many opportunities for that same brotherly kindness which is so beautiful a characteristic of our guild. Always extend to other physicians and their immediate families the courtesy of faithful attendance without pecuniary return. Avoid the petty jealousies, which, I am sorry to say, not seldom estrange physicians from each other. Always believe the best motive unless you know the worst is present. Never say an unkind word of a brother doctor when you can utter a kindly one. Try to be just even to those who are unjust to you.

Public Life.—In most communities, especially in minor towns and villages, the doctor is one of a small circle of educated men. His scientific studies make him familiar with many public problems, especially those concerning sanitation, the water-supply, the prevention of epidemics, the preservation of the public health, the problems of school life, the fostering of a proper athletic indulgence, the management of prisons, the care of the feeble-minded, the insane, the poor. On all of these questions you must make your voices heard in the communities in which you live or else you give them over to others less qualified and only mischief can follow.

No one, perhaps, is more of a leader than the physician in the various philanthropic enterprises of the day. These are closely allied in many respects to the topics just mentioned, and you will be on boards of directors and managers and trustees where you must bring your influence to bear for a wise outlay of charitable gifts and civic appropriations and for harmonizing the antagonistic elements which too often produce discord and confusion. If you combine the qualities which I have sketched for the ideal doctor, you will find that men will easily recognize you as wise leaders whom they will be glad to follow.

My best wish for you is that you may realize in your own lives these characteristics of the ideal physician. It will matter little then whether your life be long or short, for the proper measure of a life is not how long, but *how* it has been lived, and if you attain to old age, when the hairs whiten and the crow's feet begin to show, when your natural forces are abated, you will then not be alone in the world, but will have honor, love, obedience, troops of friends and one Friend above all others, the Great Physician. And when you pass from this life into the next, then shall you be greeted not only by this one great Friend, but by many from whose pathway you have plucked the thorns and briars of this earthly life; many whom through the devious paths of convalescence you have led back to perfect health, to home, husband, father, mother, children; and even if you have not been able to stay the hands of the grim reaper, those too will greet you whose last hours you have soothed amid the pangs of death and have helped through the new birth into the heavenly Jerusalem.

1729 Chestnut Street.

