

**Advantages of medical association : an address read to the Harveian Society at the opening of its 14th session / by Edward W. Murphy.**

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ADVANTAGES OF MEDICAL ASSOCIATION.

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AN ADDRESS

READ TO THE

HARVEIAN SOCIETY

AT THE OPENING OF ITS 14<sup>TH</sup> SESSION.

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BY

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## ADDRESS.

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GENTLEMEN,

IN compliance with a resolution of your Society, passed in a former year, the duty devolves upon me, as one of your Presidents for the time being, of opening the session with an address.

One of the objects of that resolution is at the present time highly important. It appears especially desirable to state to you, and through you to the profession, the advantages of a Society that has now been some years in useful operation, and which seems well calculated to unite together in friendly association our medical brethren in this district. It is important also to direct your attention to its value as a learned society, and to consider with you how far such associations contribute to professional improvement. The question has often been raised: What is the use of Medical Societies? And the feeble support which many of them receive, is like a silent confirmation of the implied objection. The reply to this query will at once present itself to the minds of those, who, by regularly attending this and other similar societies, are conscious that their time has not been mispent. But of the objector who will not do so, I would only ask, that he should look into society at large; and he must be blind indeed, if he cannot perceive throughout its entire extent a busy



movement, wherein all objects, whether good or evil, are sought to be effected by united strength. Whether the desired improvement be of a political or of a religious character—whether it affect the interest of philosophy or literature—whether it regard the study of the abstract sciences, the cultivation of the arts, or the observation of nature, viewed either in the construction of the world, or in the microscopic mechanism of its minutest inhabitant—all these subjects afford so many illustrations of the advantage of association. There are societies for all. It is not, therefore, surprising that medicine should yield to the general influence, and that we should find societies springing into existence for the purpose of promoting the improvement of the healing art. Medicine would be an exception to every other subject, if it alone derived no advantage from a principle which gives life to all besides. But medical science is no such exception; and I think I may assume it to be admitted, that as a means of advancing the knowledge of its principles, and of improving its study, association is as efficient in medicine as in other branches of scientific research.

But I would go farther than this, and, looking at the essential character of medical science, would assert that beyond all other subjects it requires this means of improvement. In the abstract sciences, it is in the power of an individual to follow out his demonstrations in the closet, and, without any other aid than the strength of his own intellect, to deduce, step by step, the most clear and surprising results. In the natural sciences, it is still in his power



patiently to observe, collect and arrange the numerous facts which nature places at his hand, and, by their aid, to establish the most comprehensive and unexpected truths. But medicine does not admit such mode of investigation. Its principles could not be laid down by a Hunter and a Cullen with the same conclusiveness as the demonstrations of a Newton or the inductions of a Cuvier. It differs essentially from those sciences in this respect, that we cannot easily grasp at its first principles, and that our inquiry into causes is often embarrassed by the contradictory results which seem to emanate from them. The copper-coloured leaf of the beech may perplex the naturalist who seeks to explain the influence of light on vegetation, but he soon finds, in the rare exception, a new and conclusive proof of the general principle. But in medicine such exceptions are constantly occurring to disturb the best constructed theory. The vital principle is concealed from us, nor are we allowed to see the secret spring which sets in motion these contradictory phenomena. We are, it is true, permitted to admire the tree of life at a distance, but if, attracted by its brightness, we seek to examine it more closely, our inquisitive gaze is at once dazzled, if not blinded, by the intensity of the light which protects it.

Hence, in medical inquiries, the most powerful intellects and the most patient investigations have failed to produce results commensurate with the labour that had been bestowed upon them, and whilst theories the most brilliant, and seemingly founded on the most conclusive reasoning, have been successively overturned, because of the sandy



foundation on which they were built, what alone remains of value to the student are the unadorned and scattered facts which formed parts of the superstructure. Hence also the individual who has done most service to medicine, is he who, with little reference to theory, has collected the largest number of facts. On this account, the works of the observant Sydenham maintain their value in the present day as fully as when they were written. The brilliant nosology of Cullen has disappeared, the doctrines of Broussais are fast fading away, but Sydenham's descriptions, although, perhaps, somewhat tarnished by time, still retain all their original value.

If, therefore, the improvement of medicine is best promoted by the accumulation of facts, by plain, clear, and accurate statements of what has been seen and observed even by detached individuals, does not this furnish an *a fortiori* argument in favour of a similar mode of illustration, conducted, not by one, but by several individuals, in other words, by a society organized for the purpose? It is in this way that Medical Societies seem to be especially useful; and if their value be admitted, the next question is,—What are the best means of carrying their objects into effect? And here is opened to us the source of many objections which have been poured out upon these societies. “What,” it has been said, “is the use of going to hear the speculations of Mr. A. or Dr. B.? Wherein consists the advantage of listening to the unprofitable discussions of gentlemen, who, having no data for their arguments, supply their place by the most



contradictory assertions? What profit is there in witnessing two gentlemen, in single combat, as it were, flinging unconnected facts and unsupported assertions at each other's opinions, which only leave you in confusion and perplexity?" If, indeed, Medical Societies were instituted for no better purposes than these, they would not only be useless, but most tiresome and injurious, differing from all other societies that admit of debate in a total lack of interest—because of a total lack of argument. It is only when Medical Societies deviate into such a course, that the abuse disguises and defeats the objects for which they are designed.

It appears to me that the true purpose of a Medical Society is the collection of medical facts, at once numerous and accurate. The means of promoting such an object is within every one's reach, who is content patiently to observe what lies before him. The benefit to be derived from discussion upon such facts is, that similar facts may be elicited from other observers, so as to afford confirmation of that brought forward, and also that what is stated may be canvassed with critical attention, so as to separate everything which may appear doubtful or heterogeneous, and ultimately to leave in the possession of the Society, a correct and valuable observation. In stating such to be one of the chief advantages of a Medical Society, it is by no means intended to imply that it is the only benefit which may be derived from it. It is not intended by these remarks to exclude the statement of opinion or the proposal of ingenious, or it may be elaborate, theories; on the contrary, a Medical Society is often,



in this respect, of infinite service as a kind of refiner of opinions. No one can be perfectly certain of avoiding error in the formation of a theory; and the most cautious speculators have sometimes fallen into the most palpable mistakes. What more effectual or more friendly corrector, then, can there be than a Medical Society, conducted on proper principles? — in which every one freely states the objections which occur to him, and no one indulges in a spirit of cavilling, or of ill-natured criticism. If the theory be sound, it comes out of the discussion more perfectly established than before, if otherwise, the detection of its weak points may lead to a more accurate review of the principles on which it is based, and thus to its being advantageously modified and corrected. But let it be published with all its faults, and it is at once thrown aside on the general heap of medical speculations, which become the refuse of our professional literature. For this purpose, therefore, a Medical Society is also valuable, but only in a secondary point of view, and in subordination to its great and leading object—the accumulation and record of facts.

If the importance of Medical Societies is proved, the objections which have been made to them may be easily disposed of, more especially as they are founded rather on the abuse than the use of the objects for which they are intended. It is certainly true, that a great deal of time may be misapplied and wasted, if discussion merges into controversy, for which medical subjects are, of all others, the least fitted, because the data of almost all their proposi-



tions are so extremely uncertain that an incontrovertible conclusion can seldom be deduced from them. Hence when controversy springs up it is little more than a series of positive and contradictory assertions, too often ending in nothing but an over-heated dispute, not less tiresome and fatiguing to the hearers than to the combatants.

Controversy is therefore unfit for a Medical Society, and becomes a fair objection to those Societies in which it is permitted. It may also be considered objectionable to give a disproportionate attention to medical theories as leading to the exclusion of the more valuable occupation of collecting facts, not to mention that the disposition to theorize is too easily acquired, and perhaps too fascinating, not to need a check rather than an encouragement. If a Society give way to speculative discussions, it will find itself too often indulging in an amusing dream, which soon vanishes, leaving behind the unpleasant reality of time and labour lost.

There is however another objection to Medical Societies which is not so easily refuted. The mere discussion of some questions, in place of elucidating may only disguise the truth; and a subject which may have been brought forward in a simple, clear, and distinct manner, may become confused when it has passed through the ordeal of an illogical debate: for in such cases sophism too frequently supplies the place of argument; the evil is not confined to questions of controversy, but may extend to those of fact. For example; a fact may be stated very clearly which is equally new and important; it may bear a very intimate relation to a theory not yet



established, the source perhaps of much controversy : it is possible that the theory may be levelled against some principle, moral or otherwise, which is generally admitted, and which should not be disturbed, or perhaps the doctrine, if true, may be capable of some dangerous or immoral application. There is consequently no little prejudice and feeling mixed up in the discussion of it. But the fact alleged, being as it were unfortunately found in bad company, does not receive fair play. The objections raised against it are not as to its truth or falsehood, the accuracy or inaccuracy of the report which has been given of it, but are entirely directed against the conclusion which it seems to establish ; every effort is made to prove a " non sequitur," and in a debate carried on with a zeal almost polemical, the fact itself is totally lost sight of. The auditors of such a discussion leave it in no little perplexity. They are quite satisfied of the danger or even falsehood of the doctrine which the fact was advanced to support, but they are not at all so clear about the fact itself. Its truth evidently had not been disproved, simply because it was not properly tested. As a fact strong in itself, and apparently giving a powerful support to the theory which has been so zealously attacked, it is sufficient to outweigh all the arguments against the theory, and there is consequently a danger that the discussion may give more strength to the error, and produce an effect precisely the opposite to that which was intended.

There are cases, therefore, where discussion may confuse a subject, if logical discrimination be not exercised in the treatment of it, and there are some



reported facts which must be tested by experiment, not by arguments.

The foregoing remarks on the advantages and disadvantages of Medical Societies in general, naturally lead me to consider the interests of that which I have the honor to address.

The Harveian Society is the only Medical Society in the district of Marylebone, and embraces a section of London of very considerable extent. The number of Medical Practitioners in this district bears an equal proportion to that in other places, which I believe is not small; still the Society consists of comparatively few members, nor does it receive that support which might be expected from its position. Why is this? Is it labouring under the incubus of those evils to which I have above alluded? I think not: I believe that those who have attended our meetings will confess that, whatever may be our errors, controversy is not one of them. We are not perhaps quite so free from an error of the opposite kind, that of shrinking from contributing our quota of those materials which constitute the life of a Society. There is certainly sometimes a tardiness amongst us in supplying papers, and a timidity in venturing opinions, apparently arising from a reluctance to disturb the quiet of our harmonious meetings by anything which might lead to disputation. To the members who may entertain such fears, I would only say that they are without foundation. Facts are too valuable not to be received with cordiality and gratitude, and opinions grounded on practical experience will always meet with deference and atten-



tion. This defect is, however, so entirely within our own power to correct, that I am sure the members have only to be made aware of it, to apply the remedy. Another circumstance which may be considered injurious to our society is that it does not seek publicity. It has been objected to us, that we are a kind of silent sister of the other Medical Societies, and that in consequence of not possessing the aid of the press, we are but little known. This is certainly a serious objection, and one which requires mature consideration. In favor of our present plan, it may be alleged that the facts and opinions brought before us are free from the criticisms (sometimes unjust) of the press, and that our discussions (often conversational) are carried on with less restraint than were our desultory remarks usually to appear in print. In the latter case there would certainly be some danger, that our less eloquent but equally experienced members might be deterred from giving to the Society their valuable observations, and that our more ready speakers might become too discursive—verbose—perhaps even controversial. But still it is questionable, whether the advantages of our silent system are commensurate with its disadvantages; and the subject is therefore recommended to the Council as well worthy of their attentive deliberation.

Our Society labours, however, under one objection which we freely admit. The room in which we assemble is much too small when there is a large attendance of members, and not the most convenient even with a small number. Your Council



are fully aware of this evil, and hope that, before long, it will be in their power to propose a remedy.

Permit me now to direct your attention to the important advantages derivable from this Institution. First, then, we give to the medical men of the district a means by which they may become known to each other in the most favorable manner, namely, by meeting together for the purpose of mutual improvement. We offer them a retreat, as it were, from the toils of practice and the cares of an anxious profession, where they can discuss their difficulties, explain their doubts, or communicate the successful results of their exertions to their fellow-labourers in the same field. This, alone, is a source of gratification to many who therefore set a proportionate value upon a Society, which gives them the opportunity of meeting their professional friends. If, however, there are any practitioners who have no doubts or difficulties, and who are only desirous to make known their successes through the medium of the press, to such persons a Society of this kind is certainly useless. But, I believe, if there be any such, they constitute a very small minority, whose assistance may be withheld without serious injury to us. Another advantage of this Society is peculiarly applicable to the present time, when the general interests of the profession occupy so much of our own, and of the public attention—a period also in which the quiet current of our avocations is becoming ruffled by gusts of medico-political discussions—and we are rendered anxious and uneasy, lest these ominous indications should be the forerunners of a destructive tempest.



Under such circumstances, each section of the profession naturally consults its own particular interests. Its members meet to discuss the best means of protecting themselves from the threatened danger, and although the interests of all are ultimately the same, there is too often but little association between the several classes. This want of intercourse is apt to produce jealousy and misunderstanding; and the great object which we all have in view, namely, the maintenance of *our rank* as a profession, is hazarded, simply because we cannot be brought cordially to co-operate for its attainment. This difficulty cannot be removed by meetings where medico-political questions are chiefly discussed, because they generally give rise to collision of opinion; neither can it be overcome, so long as each member follows only his own individual occupation. But a society for the improvement of medical science, affords us the opportunity of meeting in friendly intercourse, of dismissing unfounded prejudices, and of promoting that conviction which appears to me to be essential to our ultimate success, namely, that although we may differ on minor points, we can all agree in a common effort to sustain, at least, if not to elevate the profession to which we have the honor to belong. Should the time ever arrive, when it shall be in danger of being dragged down from its present dignified position to the level of a petty trade, we should doubtless cast aside these minor differences, in order the more efficiently to give it protection. If, then, our Society had no other advantage than this, it is certainly of some use in enabling the



different branches of the profession in its neighbourhood to meet and to know each other.

But, after all, its principal value consists in the facilities which it affords for the improvement of medical science, by adding to its collection of facts; and this value is enhanced, in proportion to the number and accuracy of the facts thus collected. Much must, of course, depend on the diligence and regularity with which members contribute in succession to the general stock of information; and if, like the little model of industry, which

*Ore trahit quodcunque potest atque addit acervo,*

each member will, with similar perseverance, use his best efforts in making provision for the winter, there will be little reason to fear for the prosperity and usefulness of this Society.



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