

**Neurological specialism : presidential address delivered at the annual meeting of the New York Neurological Society, May 1, 1883 / by W.J. Morton.**

**Contributors**

Morton, William J. 1846-1920.  
Royal College of Surgeons of England

**Publication/Creation**

[Baltimore] : [publisher not identified], 1883.

**Persistent URL**

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

**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](mailto:library@wellcomecollection.org)  
<https://wellcomecollection.org>







17.

NEUROLOGICAL SPECIALISM.

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS DELIVERED AT THE ANNUAL MEETING  
OF THE NEW YORK NEUROLOGICAL SOCIETY, MAY 1, 1883

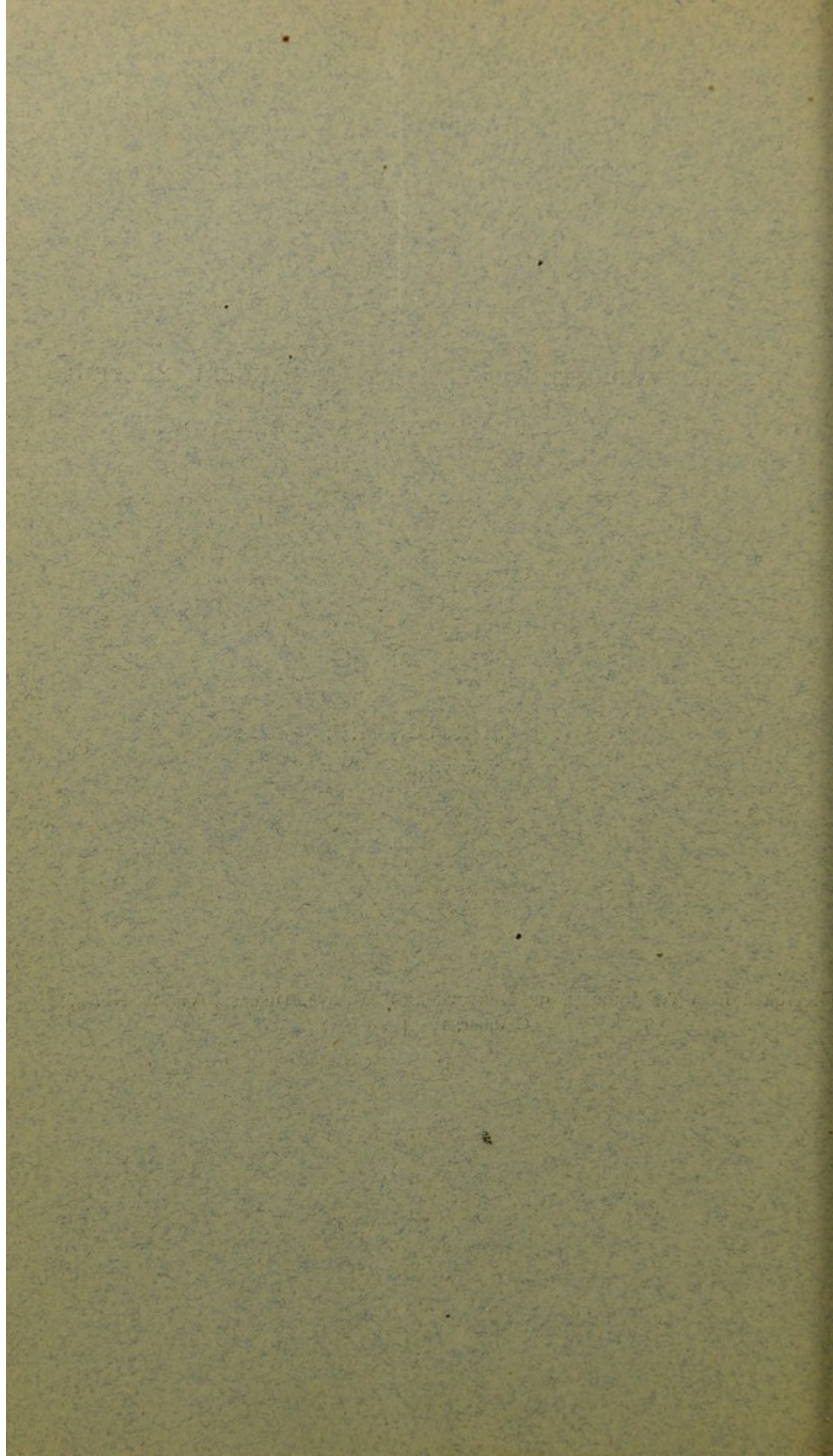
BY

W. J. MORTON, M.D.  
NEW YORK

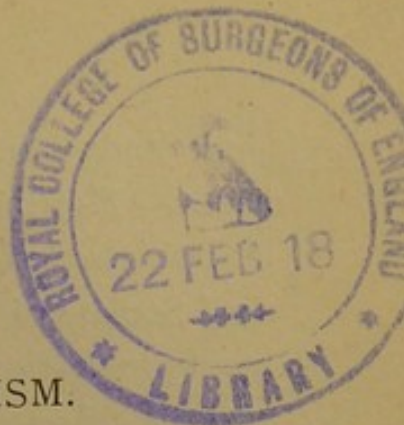


[Reprinted from the JOURNAL OF NERVOUS AND MENTAL DISEASE, Vol. x. No. 4,  
October, 1883]









## NEUROLOGICAL SPECIALISM.

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS DELIVERED AT THE ANNUAL MEETING  
OF THE NEW YORK NEUROLOGICAL SOCIETY, MAY 1, 1883.

By WILLIAM J. MORTON, M.D.,  
NEW YORK.

GENTLEMEN:—I enter upon the duties which you have assigned to me, deeply conscious of the compliment and the confidence conveyed in your vote, and in full reliance upon that active and earnest support that has always been characteristic of the proceedings of this Society.

In accordance with the precedent which demands on this evening "the addresses of the retiring and newly elected Presidents," I venture to bring before you some general remarks relating to our Society,—its past, its future, its aims, and its position as the exponent of a vigorous and special offshoot of general medicine.

Of the past I shall say but little. Our age is not yet so venerable as to present charms whose enumeration shall obliterate the novelty of our present. Our records do not yet invite the antiquary to rehearse in detail our earlier achievements.

But, for the benefit of those who have recently joined our ranks, I may note, in passing, several prominent points in our career.

We are disposed to believe that an unusual degree of success has thus far attended our efforts. With us hard

---

Reprinted from the JOURNAL OF NERVOUS AND MENTAL DISEASE, Vol. x. No. 4, October, 1883.



work and good fortune have often auspiciously joined hands. Not the least notable of the events that contributed to strengthen our position were the dissolution of the rival Society of Neurology and Electrology in 1877, and the hearty invitation that was issued to its members to unite with us. In response to this invitation a large accession of working talent was added to our already active organization. The divided interests thus happily joined have since flowed on in comparatively uninterrupted harmony.

The position of the Neurological Society has been from the very outset unique among our metropolitan societies. Its work has been a double and parallel one. It has been the forum for a remarkable amount of scientific work, and it has been a powerful agent in the formation and guidance of public opinion upon subjects about which it has the special right to speak. I would not for a moment be accused of magnifying our own merits,—allowable though it be for an incorporated organization of many persons to speak of itself in terms denied by conventional modesty to the individual,—but I am sure I speak within the facts, and in the spirit of that just pride which we all feel in our work, when I say that we deserve and enjoy a well-earned reputation for industry and devotion to the specialty of neuropathology.

In merely glancing over the titles and recalling the character of the scientific productions that have been brought before us in formal papers during the last nine years, the observer cannot fail to be impressed with the amount and merit of the work that has been accomplished; and not the least profitable of our proceedings have been the animated and instructive discussions which have been called forth. In this latter respect, the proceedings of the Society have offered to its members a peculiar interest. As a rule, in medical societies a few men do the actual work. One of



these few, for instance, reads a paper, exhaustive, carefully prepared, and probably presenting debatable original ideas; this paper is attentively listened to; several members arise, make complimentary corroborative remarks, or relate a "similar case," and there the subject ends, and the paper is passed on to its routine place in medical journals. But this has not been the practice in the Neurological Society, and herein lies one secret of its vitality and interest to its members; individuality is well marked; opinions differ widely, and those who hold them sustain them warmly. And it may be true that there sometimes arises a slight acerbity born of animated attrition, but this is quickly obliterated by the common interest.

Our Society has a reputation of being "lively." This criticism we regard as the highest compliment, for to be "lively" is to be working, comparing ideas, progressing; our emulation is friendly and healthy. May the dust of burnt-out opinions never settle down upon its proceedings and clog its energy; may it never become conservative, but rather press on and excite competitive intellectual activity to the fullest bent of which the individual is capable.

In looking over the titles of the papers that have been already read before our Society (an average of about one and a half to each meeting, to say nothing of presentation of cases and specimens), the attention is attracted by the diversity of topics treated. Each year's work is a fair reflection of the history of neurological advance, and in this connection I cannot refrain from expressing a keen regret that our work is not accessible in the shape of printed transactions.

And added to the proper satisfaction that we may gain from a retrospect of our routine work, there also remains to us a higher pleasure in recalling the initiative share that we have taken in the great movement of amelioration in



the treatment of the insane, which is now occupying public attention. In 1878 there was voiced by this Society ideas that have been powerful in preventing great injustice to these unfortunates. The movement, signalized in its early stages by single and scattered shots from various quarters, opened into a steady fire against the oppressors of the insane from the moment that the Neurological Society entered into the contest. The history of our share in this work should not be forgotten. At the stated meeting of March, 1870, our retiring President read a paper upon "Reform in Scientific Psychiatry," and a Committee on "Asylum Abuses," consisting of Drs. Wm. A. Hammond, E. C. Seguin, E. C. Spitzka, W. J. Morton, L. C. Gray, T. A. McBride, and E. C. Harwood, was appointed to make a report. The committee drew up a memorial to the Legislature of the State of New York, praying for an inquiry into the management of our insane asylums. This memorial was referred to the Committee on Public Health. The members of the Committee on Asylum Abuses will probably never forget their first experience on coming in contact with a political medical ring, as shameless as it was powerful by reason of its alliance with low politics.

The report of the Senate Committee in response to the memorial was an unexampled specimen of trickery and mendacity. But a breach in the Chinese wall of seclusion, secrecy, and tyranny which surrounded the management of the insane in many asylums was effected. Our committee was pertinacious and undaunted, and within two years had the pleasure of knowing that a second Senate report, embracing all that they had claimed, had been presented to the Senate; though, strange to say, thanks to methods known to Albany politics, this report has never been printed and made public.

But the proceedings in the Legislature are now compara-



tively unimportant. That great engine of reform, public opinion, has begun its irresistible movements. The press records blows struck on every hand at mediævalism in the treatment of the insane. Legislative committees are being appointed, asylum after asylum is being investigated. In some asylums there exists all that can be expected, under the present system, even from the most humane of superintendents; in others, the blighting influence of officialism is exposed; while in others again, unspeakable barbarities are unearthed.

And, most encouraging of all, advanced minds among the superintendents of asylums themselves are attaining to the consciousness that in them resides the prerogative of bringing about the very reforms which the public now demands. The Neurological Society touched the spring that set the wheels of reform in motion. It may now calmly watch the result.

But I turn from our past to our future. Even the brief retrospect in which we have indulged is sufficient to throw into clear light the golden thread of continuity of purpose in our history which seems to forecast the way to us who take up and carry on the strand. We are the inheritors of a worthy patrimony, and it becomes our fortunate lot to contribute, so far as lies within our power and capacity, to the dignity and value of the inheritance that our predecessors have accumulated in the archives of this society.

As I glance over our list of seventy or more active members I am encouraged to expect an unusual amount of neurological work during the coming year. I see the names of veterans in the service who may be always relied upon to furnish papers; the names of other members, who, great as are their talents, possess a still greater inertia, against which must be brought a certain amount of urging. I see also the names of our modest members, and those of newly



fledged neurologists now coming forward to receive their accolade. From all these we expect assistance. We have only to look about us at our meetings to recognize the great interest in the cause of neurological work, which only steadfastly awaits an opportunity to express itself. The Society says to all its members: We expect your earnest support.

It is really a serious mission that we are engaged in. All along the line, the world over, neurological medicine is pushing forward its work in a manner that proclaims it to be, of all the specialties, the most advanced, the most active, the most fruitful in results to humanity. True, some of this advance is due to the labors of those who are by no means specialists in the treatment of diseases of the nervous system,—but is rather a contribution to general medicine; the fact still remains that the work is done in the department of neurology, and that its results are greeted, fostered, utilized, and perpetuated beneath the banner of specialism. In Germany and France the study of the symptoms, the causes, the pathology, and the treatment of diseases of the nervous system has long held a strongly accentuated position, derived from the special labors of a long line of eminent workers in this field, whose contributions to the subject have now become classical in medical literature. Of England and, in more recent times, of Italy, the same remark may be made. And never in our own country has the interest in this subject been more generally diffused throughout the medical profession than at present. The truth of this assertion may be verified from many points of view. Our medical periodical literature contains numerically more observations relating to nervous diseases than ever before, and, what is of more consequence, these contributions are of a higher order of merit.

In the various cities of the Union a number of physicians are taking up the study as a specialty and are devoting much labor to it.



Medical schools are awakening to the importance of offering to their students advanced instruction in this department, while the post-graduate schools and the polyclinics contribute notably to a clearer definition of this branch of medicine. In the midst of this generally increasing interest, organized and equipped for the work, and recognized as a leading special society, it is peculiarly appropriate that the Neurological Society should assert itself with renewed ardor, and should concentrate within the systematized fold of its labors all the neurological work that is now being done in this city. In this connection it is not amiss to refer to the fact that two or three of our members, whose labors have always been a credit to the Society, have expressed the opinion, that work in neurology could be more advantageously performed in the medical sections of the New York Academy of Medicine. And since neurology, according to them, is to be relegated to section work in the Academy, the same holds true, of course, of laryngology, ophthalmology, otology, and so on. The effect of this plan, successfully carried out, would be to break up in turn all the special societies in the city—to merge all into a common level of general society work. Identity and individuality are to be lost in an official machine of wheel within wheel, revolving for the glory and advance of—what?—not of specialism but of general medicine. Surely this would be a retrograde step. For years past the specialties have been branching off from the parent stem in the face of great opposition from general medicine; they have planted themselves firmly on their own pedestals, and have a fixed position, and respect, and confidence. The constant tendency of the last twenty years in medicine has been toward decentralization—in other words, specialism; and now we are asked to go back on our tracks and centralize. It is undoubtedly true that an act of amalgamation of the kind



proposed would benefit neither general medicine nor neurology. For, owing to the very multiplicity of the facts of medicine to-day, large bodies become entangled in their own lines, or neutralize by want of unity of direction the efforts of individuals. Smaller bodies like our own concentrate their energies, and in their very unity of purpose find a stimulus to exertion unknown to the larger body.

I have alluded more at length to this question than would have been worth while did it not concern other special societies in common with our own. The danger needs but to be recognized to be averted. Members of the Academy, as many of us are, and holding it in highest esteem, we yet feel that in this endeavoring to absorb into itself under its several sections the various special societies of this city, the Academy is undertaking a task beyond its powers and beyond its capacity of adequate control. Certain it is, that the opinions expressed and now carried into effect by the two or three late members alluded to will find little sympathy in this body.

I have so frequently referred to the fact that the members of this Society were engaged in the study of a particular and sharply defined branch of medical science, that I feel that a few words defining our position in this respect may well be embraced in these general remarks.

The principle that governs the necessity of studying the diseases of the nervous system by themselves, is the same principle that has compelled specialization in other branches of medicine.

Medical art and science of to-day have expanded to enormous proportions; numberless investigators are at work; allied sciences are introduced; facts are daily added to the sum of medical knowledge, until it has become impossible for a human being even of extraordinary intellectual power to grasp the new facts, arrange them in his



mind, or utilize them in practice. Time was, and that not thirty years ago, when the general practitioner of good ability conscientiously felt that he could make himself master of all medical science. To-day, few, if any, can pretend to keep pace with medical progress. One by one a branch has shot off the parent stem, dependent yet independent. The very attempt to keep up in the race of accumulating knowledge begat hypocrisy and discouragement. Specialism is, then, the substitution of precision for vagueness—of a concrete differential diagnosis for an abstract supposition; it is the forced acknowledgment that the average human mind cannot practically grasp all of medical science; it is, in short, the protest of knowledge against ignorance, and it now becomes, indeed, a matter of conscience to specialize medical labors according to the tasks or talents of the physician. And specialists themselves have even begun to again subdivide. There is, no doubt, a danger to medicine in thus becoming cut into smaller and still smaller sections. The eye, it is said, will become microscopic—the mental reach of comprehension correspondingly narrowed. This is the evil of specialism. It must be faced, for the dissection now begun will go on. It is but the natural law of the division of labor,—true of commerce, and now of law and medicine.

The danger alluded to is however more superficial than real. The conscientious specialist never forgets his relations to general medicine. It is well understood that he should have had a good preliminary experience in general practice. There can be no sympathy with the immature jump from a medical school into a specialty.

Neurology is but following the general tendency of the times, and with better right than many other specialties, for it offers to its followers a field for investigations so vast, so fruitful, so impossible of exhaustion, that even if they



should desire it they are precluded from equally extended investigations into other branches of medicine.

From a purely practical point of view, it is, then, proper, nay, it is even compulsory, to the neurologist to be a specialist. But the remark has often been made that neurology is less a specialty than other specialties; that it is an unnecessary subdivision of medicine, since the morbid processes that go on in the nervous tissue are either themselves the real basis of other diseases, or, on the other hand, are caused by diseases in other parts; our boundary lines, it is claimed, are quite too shifting, and may be so construed as to include almost all of general medicine. This criticism is no more nor less than a criticism upon the defects of our present nosology or classification of diseases. If it shall ever become demonstrated that affections of the nerves are the essential basis of all diseases, why, so much the better for the neurologist; he has been upon the right track. If, on the other hand, there are diseases (and no one doubts that there are) peculiar to the nervous tissue, then, for practical reasons already given, the neurologist is justified in devoting his exclusive attention to these diseases.

But the best basis for a separation of the affections of the nervous system from other diseases is from the stand-point of symptomatology. The study of symptoms alone has led to the discovery of many of the most important diseases known to medical science. By this method, Duchenne discovered locomotor ataxia, progressive muscular atrophy, pseudo-hypertrophic paralysis, and other affections. True, physiology lent its aid, and pathology verified, but symptomatology furnished the lines of demarcation that erected the unknown affection into the dignity of a recognizable and a predicable disease. I would by no means underrate the value of the facts contributed to



neuro-pathology by pathological anatomy or by physiology. On the contrary, a thorough study of these branches is essential to the clinician. A familiarity with the methods that reveal to us the secrets, so far as this is possible, of the morbid processes that are associated with nervous diseases, may be our guide in our efforts to correlate the symptoms of our patient, but they should not constitute the chief end and aim of the neurologist. Familiar with the fundamental laws of neuro-anatomy, physiology, and pathology, let symptomatology—in other words, clinical study—be his main pursuit and interest. In this direction also lies the greatest amount of material for clinical study; for those suffering from nervous affections are many, while but few of them will be ever available for examination by scalpel or microscope. And we are right in emphasizing the position of neurology in medicine, and in devoting our best energies to its success. To the sick, the subdivision of labor is an advantage, since, other things being equal, this means skilled labor. Clearly, the field for work is all that the neurologist can attend to—it is certainly more than the general practitioner can keep up with.

It is, indeed, a great pity, in my opinion, that there are not more specialists than there now are in all branches of medicine.

I have but a word more to say, and that word a passing tribute to a deceased member. Time is laying his hand upon all of us, but death has rarely been with us. One of our number—Dr. Geo. M. Beard—has lately passed away. A man, singular, but honest and strong in his singularities. His intellectual capacities were far above the average; the phases of his mental activity were distinctly original. He wrote much—possibly too much. A critical friend has said that his fame would have been more enduring if he had written five books instead of fifty. His generalizations



were often too sweeping and too hastily arrived at. On the other hand, they were often strikingly accurate; and when subsequently some few of them, relating to the Gospel of Relaxation and other subjects, fell from the lips of Mr. Herbert Spencer, they were thought to be words of golden truth. Again, Dr. Beard attempted very difficult problems. He often grasped one portion of a circle, and hauled in upon it only to find the same portion in due time again in his hands.

But far be it from us to criticise. His work is done. And in judging of a man's life-work we must ever keep in mind that we are probably not familiar with an innermost correlation of factors peculiar to the man, worked out in his own consciousness, but concealed from his friends, and born of his attrition against circumstances.

In Dr. Beard the Society has lost an active member whose presence at our meetings will always be kindly remembered.

But I fear that the limits of time which your courtesy has extended to me are now more than occupied by these desultory remarks, which, in the present instance, I trust you will accept in lieu of a more formal address. To you I now look for a year's work satisfactory to your own consciences and commensurate with that which this Society has a right to ask from you.







