

Memoir on the surgical diseases of the poor, addressed to the surgeons, clergy, and heritors, in the remote parts of the country.

Contributors

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M E M O I R
ON THE
SURGICAL DISEASES OF THE POOR,

ADDRESSED TO
THE SURGEONS, CLERGY, AND HERITORS,
IN THE REMOTE PARTS OF THE COUNTRY.

John Beech

I ADDRESS you on a subject which well deserves the attention of the Public, and of those especially who are the natural guardians of the Peasantry and labouring Order of Society. And as it is my purpose to devote a portion of every future day of my life to this kind of charity, I feel that I have a claim upon your attention, which I urge the more confidently, because I plead in behalf of the Poor, of a description of Poor, who, being afflicted with tumors and other surgical diseases, cannot feign a misery which they do not feel, nor sue for a charity of which they are unworthy: I claim this privilege in right of my Profession, which is a liberal as well as a learned one, and there is no well disposed member of it, who is not in the daily practice of giving his time and labour, medicine and charity, to many who become known to him only when assailed at once by poverty and disease.—These irresistible calls engage every benevolent member of our profession in scenes of distress, where he sees, what is I fear unknown to the Public, how many of the lower classes of society die of diseases which a little charitable care, a little timely help, and a just forbearance with the prejudices of uneducated men, might prevent.

There are many natural causes to account for the most unsightly and loathsome diseases being found chiefly among the lower orders. Scrophula, the prevailing disease of our cold moist climate, affects the glands, the bones, and the joints;—the peasantry, especially in the higher parts of the country, are ill fed, and always exposed to the inclemencies of the weather;—and workmen of every description are subject to falls, blows, and strains in labour; and often a slight exposure to cold, or an unusual strain in labour, lays the beginnings of an incurable and fatal disease.

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Indeed every such disease is incurable in this rank of life : even the slightest injury, or the most trivial tumor is dangerous to the poor man, who has no time of rest, no remission of labour to favour the cure ;—a joint bruised, a bone injured though not broken, a gland swelled from cold, or an artery weakened in its coats by some sudden strain, grows by long neglect and frequent injuries, to be a tumor of the most shocking aspect.

Yet these diseases have their beginnings in seemingly trivial tumors, which timely care and confinement might prevent, or which might be cured at first by almost bloodless operations. The tumor which seems but a slight deformity, void of pain, or accompanied with such pain only as is but slightly heeded by a poor man, inured to continual labour, comes in the end to interrupt the breathing, to affect the swallowing, to disturb or impede the circulation of the limb, or to press upon the vital organs, or extends to such a degree that blood suddenly bursts from the diseased vessels, ulceration and cancer ensue, and a man in the prime and vigour of life, insensible to the beginnings and slow progress of his disease, is brought to an untimely and painful death. To the Poor misfortune never comes single, their diseases, by neglect and poverty, assume such horrid forms as are almost unknown in the higher ranks of life, and call for sympathy and charity ;—sympathy with their sufferings, and charity even for those prejudices by which they are caused.

The vulgar are insensible to every lesser pain, indifferent to every slight deformity, unconscious of remote consequences, and full of prejudices against our profession ; and, as it requires an effort of the imagination, and a cultivated reason to conceive distant dangers, it is often in vain that you endeavour to explain the future consequences of disease to those in the lower ranks of life. Thence it comes to pass, that swellings and tumors, of the bones, of the joints, of the breast, of the glands surrounding the jaws and throat, of the axilla or groin, are suffered to grow uncontrolled to an enormous size, only because unattended in the earlier stage of the disease with ulceration or pain. But disabled at last, the unhappy creatures decline into poverty, become objects of charity, and nourish these tumors which are to cause their death, as the present means of gaining their bread. The Public knows not of the many who withdraw themselves from the eye of every fellow-creature and expire in misery ; and yet such loathsome spectacles are exhibited in our lanes and public streets as disgrace no other civilized country, so that foreigners are heard to express their concern and pity.

To us it must be a matter of deep concern to remove this reproach, and to save from extreme misery numbers of the industrious and labouring class of society, who are brought to poverty only through disease, and are blameless in every thing but those prejudices by which they are prevented from seeking timely help. An Infirmary is the last and desperate resource of the Poor, and the cases which excite the deepest interest in any such public institution, are neglected diseases, beyond the reach of surgery; tumors which oppress the breathing or swallowing, but which are connected too closely with the great vessels to admit of operation, indurations of the salivary glands of such enormous magnitude as to protrude the tongue, obstruct the breathing, and destroy the jaw-bones by their pressure, swellings of the bones so great, and advancing so close to the trunk of the body, as not to admit of amputation, the last and desperate resource; polypi obstructing the throat and nostrils, and bloody tumors, accompanied with such hemorrhages as no means can prevent or moderate; tumors of the extremities, which, though local at first, and easily extirpated, have extended along the whole limb, and reached the body, and acquired such a connection with the great vessels and nerves as to render any surgical experiment too critical for a prudent man to attempt. Cancerous, and aneurismal, and even lumpy tumors, the most simple and unoffending of all, often end in death, and while, from their enormous size, and fatal consequences, they excite a most natural interest in the beholders, while the student has the privilege of looking upon the sufferings of the dying patient, and witnessing the devastation which a tumor never fails in its later stages to produce, while the recorded cases of this nature serve to demonstrate how the parts of the body may be changed, and what the human constitution will endure, and serve to explain by analogy the incipient and curable degrees of disease; still it must be acknowledged, that the very existence of such neglected diseases is proof unquestionable, that something is yet wanting for the relief of the Poor.

An hospital is the last resort of those who most need such charity. In the first period of disease, while the injury is recent, and the remedy easy and sure, in that period most favourable to recovery, the poor man has no prudent friend to impress him with a sense of danger, to admonish him of the ill consequences of delay. In the next degree, when he is disabled from work and distracted with pain, and the sense of increasing poverty alarms him, still his condition is not so dispiriting as to make him throw himself upon the public charity, and enter in that Hospital against

which his prejudices have grown up from his very childhood. During all the progress of his disease, the poor man looks forward to what may be his future lot: the worst he fears is to be thrown into a Hospital, and he balances his present danger with the shame, the unhappiness, the pains of a public operation, the agony of being exposed before numbers of spectators, and lingers on in doubt and fear, till, at last, even the sacrifice of these natural and just feelings can no longer avail: bereft by dreadful sufferings of every domestic comfort, become a burthen on his friends, he is at length conveyed to a Hospital, when too late to receive relief, his case only becoming an object of importance as a recorded instance and fatal warning of the incurable stage of his malady, or an example to students, of a desperate and unavailing operation.

Let us reflect humanely and patiently on the prejudices of the poor:—we condemn them as irrational because we witness their fatal effects, yet they are such, I believe, as the best and wisest of us, in like circumstances, would not disavow. It is not alone because of the disgrace, that the poor man goes into an Hospital with reluctance, nor from the fear of committing himself into the hands of young and inexperienced Surgeons, whose names, conduct, or skill are all unknown to him; it is not the fear of submitting himself to rules with which he is made acquainted too late to refuse his assent, of being separated from his friends, when he most needs their kindness, of resigning in some degree his natural will, and the privilege of judging for himself: but, he knows that an Infirmary is a place of public and general charity, in which are received patients of every description, with fluxes, fevers, erysipilas, eruptive diseases, and various maladies, which cannot but be regarded as sources of infection, by which the most simple surgical malady or trivial sore may be rendered dangerous, and which are certainly unfavourable to one who has to undergo any great operation. Every season there are febrile diseases which seize indiscriminately all the sores of an Hospital, and are very fatal to those who have undergone operations; we know not as yet to what cause these should be imputed; but this we know, that, while all the sores and incisions, and amputated stumps of patients lying in an Hospital, are seized with gangrene, no such disease assails those even of the Poor who have suffered operations in private, though ill-accommodated, and breathing seemingly a less salubrious air. A labouring man arriving from the peaceful scene, and wholesome air of the village in which he has lived and laboured, would, independent of any disease, find his health endangered by the noise, the confusion,

the confinement, and noxious air of an Hospital, and, it is easy to imagine, what agonies of mind he must suffer, who hears the cries of those under that operation which he is preparing to undergo, and sees his fellow-sufferer conveyed to that scene of trial, or carried back in solemnity and silence to his bed, there to wait the issue, life or death; he may hear his dying groans, he must be informed of what he has suffered as related by nurses and other attendants; and scenes like these once passed through, must be a subject of conversation and deep interest among those of the lower ranks of life, who are the most liable to become patients. The poor man has heard too, that an Infirmary is not a simple charity, that it is not founded solely for him and such as him, that it is reputed a school of experiments, and not much famed for successful operations: he knows that when he goes there, his fears and his sufferings must be exposed to hundreds of spectators, and he believes, in his ignorance, that even his remains would not be respected, should he die. Can we blame prejudices so natural, or wonder that the poor man who has no other asylum lingers irresolute till his case is hopeless?

These are circumstances in which the efforts of one individual of acknowledged skill, the pledged and proffered services of one in whose humanity and talents the lower people may confide, may be a blessing to the poor over all the country. The poor man who knows of no resource but that which he regards as disgraceful, who, besides the doubts of committing himself to surgeons whose very names he does not know, fears that he will forfeit by going into an hospital the natural right of deciding for himself, and who is sensible that his person and his sufferings will be equally exposed to strangers,—would most gladly seek advice of any private man of reputation who were likely to respect his afflicted condition, and treat his prejudices and his malady with the same humane and tender concern that he would the maladies of those who can by their riches command assistance. By applying early for advice, the number of slight but timely operations would be augmented, and the examples of desperate diseases would decrease: the gland which would have grown to such a bulk as to endanger suffocation, the tumor which would have burst into ulceration, the hernia which would have terminated in gangrene, the diseased vessels, which, by a few years of growth, would have dilated, and poured out blood so profusely as to have brought the patient to his grave, might thus, by prudent council and timely interposition, be prevented from becoming fatal: there can be no greater charity, than to bespeak the confidence of the poor, and give them a regular claim to advice by offering it. There are besides, various cases in which the coun-

try surgeon is honestly doubtful of his own opinion, and has no one to assist him in his consultations ; many, where the operation which he deliberately approves of, and would most willingly perform, is yet too full of danger to be attempted on his own mere authority ; often he is deterred by the clamours of relations, the jealousy of rivals, or the prejudices of the well-meaning but ignorant neighbours ; and often he perceives it to be too much to attempt a critical operation, ill appointed as he often is with instruments or apparatus, and unassisted. These then are to be added to the innumerable causes which bring people dying of incurable diseases to the capital of the country.

I should not dare to publish this short memoir, did I not publish at the same moment a volume on these very subjects, full of drawings and narratives of such disorders grown desperate by delay, and requiring operations proportionately desperate ; nor should I presume to describe thus the imperfections of our institutions and the sufferings of the poor, had I not made their diseases, and the means of relieving them, the study and business of my life. I know by experience to what extent these duties must, when I thus avowedly undertake them, occupy my hours, and fill my mind ; but I also know how little they need interrupt more necessary, or rather more selfish duties : for during the most anxious periods of my lecturing, I never failed to note down every remarkable case in the Royal Infirmary, and take the drawings with my own hand ; and since then I have, in the busiest moments of my practice, drawn anatomical plans of every operation I have performed, and written every case with diligence, finding always an hour to devote to this favourite pursuit. This is the course of study and practice which makes every ordinary duty fit lighter on the mind, and enables me to calculate every claim on my time, and to fulfil every duty with alacrity. "The duty we delight in physics pain." Practice thus diligently pursued is true experience ; and the improvement I have derived in all times from my attention to the poor should be repaid where it must be so useful, where it is so justly due. These charities form a continual source of improvement to the young men whose education is intrusted to my care ; and I have ever endeavoured to teach them a humane and patient temper by lessons of practice and examples of diligence. May I not acknowledge, that I still am occupied with study, and desire to improve ? When that zeal expires, or is absorbed in more selfish pursuits, a professional man is of little value indeed to any rank of his fellow citizens.

By the following regulations I hope to extend, wherever they may be called for, those humane and charitable offices to which, in common with my professional brethren, I am bound by my oath of initiation. It needs no such solemn conjuration to engage us in these duties; they are naturally our earliest occupation, and, according to the spirit in which they are performed, they become irksome or pleasing: they should be, throughout the whole course of a professional life, a source of continual improvement. In neglected cases such as I have now described, the physician sees, as if magnified and made perceptible to every sense, the disorders of all the parts of the body; and by those obvious alterations of structure the natural functions of the body are explained, and the observer is taught to reason on the causes and dangerous tendency of such changes as are imperceptible and unthought of when disease begins. In our science, as in every other, a young man having proceeded from the schools no other way qualified for practice than by knowing general rules and theories, soon perceives, that all he can do or imagine for the cure of disease, all his surest reasonings and most effectual operations, are founded on a knowledge of precedents, and particular facts, observed or recorded.

1st. I shall reserve one hour, that, viz. from three to four o'clock, daily, for receiving the poor, examining their complaints, and giving orders concerning those who have arrived from a distance, and at all hours there shall be some one ready to receive them.

2d. The first interview is that in which I give general directions for their accommodations, treatment, or attendance. I shall then appoint another for deliberately enquiring into their condition, registering their cases, hearing their own narrative, or reading whatever letters they bring; and I shall invariably deliver a summary opinion to the clergyman, or heritor, by whom the patient is sent to my care, or a detailed opinion to the surgeon of his native place. If an operation is adviseable, it shall be performed; if the patient returns, he shall return with a full opinion on the difficulties which have discouraged me from attempting his cure.

3d. Should I judge it right to perform any operation, I shall intimate that design to the surgeon who has first had the care of the patient, and shall perform it with my own hand; I shall provide every thing for the operation, give the patients wine and medicines gratis, and appoint steady and sensible young men to attend and dress them, and shall myself see every duty faithfully performed.

4th. There are few even of the poor so helpless or unprotected, as not to have some slender means of subsistence allowed them, perhaps by their masters or friends. Should they be but a little above absolute poverty, I shall assist in providing for those who have to undergo any great operation, as lithotomy, amputation, the extirpation of any remarkable tumor, the cancerous breast, &c. ; and I know that a little will serve to place them in a respectable lodging, and comparative luxury : I know by experience how slight a charge it would be to receive and protect all the poor who come to the metropolis, to suffer the more important surgical operations : for it is the loungers, and those deformed with eruptive sores and ulcerated limbs that occupy the otherwise empty wards of an hospital, and abuse the public charity—loungers who keep their posts for months, and when dismissed, return again under the slightest pressure, not of diseases but of circumstances. Those suffering operations are comparatively few, and for them a few shillings a week will procure a neat and commodious lodging, among quiet and worthy people, and in a wholesome air, attended by their friends ; one or two bottles of wine will serve every right and useful purpose ; and a sick-bed and the period of recovering from an operation is no time for enjoying luxuries, except the indispensible luxury of tranquillity and silence, while the most simple food alone is acceptable or allowable.

It has been my constant practice to assist, and often entirely to support the poor ; and having, on occasion of any great operation, set apart a small sum, seldom exceeding two guineas, never amounting to three, I have found it so discretely and economically used by my pupils, for the behoof of the patient, that before it was expended he was well, and preparing for his journey home. Whatever pittance of charity is sent with a poor patient, I shall see administered faithfully for his comfort.

5th. The time which these arrangements require is not devoted solely to the poor : it is that portion of time which I have appropriated to the continually improvement of my mind and talents, in judging and operating. It has been my custom to make every drawing, narrative, and plan for operating with my own hand. The Cases of former years are registered in many volumes, so that when I write on professional matters I write not conjectures, but experiments, facts, and precedents. Those of future years will be compiled surely with no less care, and shall be published annually in a small octavo volume, accompanied with drawings, and

such selections from my former case books as may contribute to illustrate each new phenomenon, or rule of practice. I shall also publish in that work whatever useful or singular cases are communicated by other surgeons*.

There are certain sympathies which the affluent should be called upon to feel in the midst of the comforts and luxuries they enjoy, the least part of which might serve to alleviate much misery, if not to remove all that is not inseparable from human nature; and in no description of men is it more becoming to urge these claims, than in men of our profession, who see all forms of suffering, and know the true objects of charity. It would be easy to prove, that a very little charity, judiciously bestowed, would equalize the comforts of all ranks, and make the poor almost as independent as the rich in the most trying moments, when the prospect of a painful and uncertain operation is embittered by poverty. This would be at once accomplished were those of higher rank, when they are to undergo an operation, to allow a pittance to those who are to suffer the same pains and dangers, in poverty and helplessness.

6th. While I shall neglect no person in distress, I shall particularly charge myself with those who have their cases attested by the surgeon of their native place, as requiring particular advice, or a doubtful and dangerous operation; and of those who are certified by their clergyman to be good and worthy people, deserving protection and assistance: but there may also be many who feel a poverty which their appearance does not betray, nor the honest pride allow them to acknowledge. I require but the slightest intimation to use every delicacy towards such patients, and prevent every painful feeling.

My partner, Mr. Allan, who has been long privy to my intentions, subscribes with pleasure to every obligation I hereby take upon me: he has long assisted me in my operations and will be careful of those people, when at any time accidents, or needful relaxation call me from my charge.

The active period of man's life, betwixt the acquisition and the use of knowledge, is limited to a very narrow space; and purposes such as I now announce should not be delayed; but I have refrained from this public declaration only till years

* I very earnestly request every professional Gentleman, who wishes to have any observation published in my Annual Volume of Consultations, that he will, when the disease has proved fatal, send me the preparation, that drawings may be made for his Cases, as for my own.

and experience have given me some authority : until my first volume of Consultations was laid before my profession and the public, as a proof how capable I am of perseverance in these arduous duties, and of the zealous manner in which I have ever fulfilled them : until my proffered assistance became an act of real unequivocal charity towards the poor. I now most willingly take a step which I can never retract, and bind myself, when time is becoming more precious and gainful, to tasks which must entail upon me many irksome moments, and involve me deep in scenes of distress : but I am confident that by my professional help I shall be able to do much for the relief of many a poor man, at this moment, perhaps, afraid to enter into an hospital, and doubtful where or how to apply for help, a little above poverty, and yet unable to give fees proportioned to the danger of his condition. Having once conceived this design, and felt all its importance to my immediate pupils, to the public, to my own improvement, and to the science which by my writings I profess to teach, as well as practice, I should forever condemn myself, were I to fear any degree of anxiety or toil in so worthy an occupation.

Edinburgh W^o G. George
 May 28th 1788

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