Presidential Address
to the Royal Medical Society of Edinr.
Decr. 18. 1857

Gentlemen

I beg to offer you my most sincere thanks for the honor you have conferred on me in placing me here; and let me assure you that throughout the Session I will do my utmost, with support and in conjunction with my fellow-presidents, to advance the reputation of the Society and the interests of its members.

It would be no easy matter in our 121st session to find a new subject for a Presidential Address, and I shall not attempt to do so, but, Gentlemen, there is one subject which cannot but be interesting to us all, and which is so continually changing that it may be said to be always new — I mean the present Condition of Medicine, both as a Science and an Art.

It is most important for those who hope soon to undertake the practical duties of our profession, not only to have distinct ideas as to individual diseases

and their appropriate treatment, but also to have a comprehensive view of the general bearings of the Profession, and a correct appreciation of the changes which it is continually undergoing.

And this subject is a specially appropriate one because at no time during the whole history of Medicine have these changes been so rapid or so important as since the beginning of the present century, and during no other equal period has such progress been made in elucidating the nature, causes, and results of Disease, and consequently in our ability to detect, and remove or relieve it.

We shall not wonder at this progress if we look at the sources of it, and the consid=
=eration of some of these may very profitably occupy us for a little.

As the first and greatest of them all I mention the advances which have been made in the study of Morbid Anatomy.

Morb: Anat:

It has indeed done great things for Medicine, and it must do greater things still.

Tub: Diseases

It has taught us, for example, as to Tubercular diseases, the nature, course, and curability of Phthisis pul=
=monalis: it has told us that Ascites often depends on tubercular disease of the peritoneum, and that Hydrocephalus is usually caused by the deposition of Tubercle in the Arachnoid.

Brain

As to the Brain it has shewn us the connection between softening and Apoplexy.

Lungs. As to the Lungs, it has enabled us to distinguish the different Inflammations; it has revealed the nature of Pulmonary Emphysema and its relation to Collapse and Bronchitis; and it has shewn the mode of production and the consequences of ~~Empy~~ Pneumothorax and Empyema.

Heart & Vessels. As to the Heart & Vascular System, it has demonstrated the almost constant connection between Rheumatism and Inflammation of the Pericardial & Endocardial Membranes; it has shewn the constant & necessary connection between Cardiac & Pulmonary diseases, and between Diseases of the Right and Left sides of the Heart; and it has taught us to explain obscure laryngeal symptoms by the pressure of an Aneurism on the Recurrent Laryngeal nerve.

Alimentary Canal As to the Alimentary Canal it has corrected our ideas as to the sources of Hæmatemesis and Melæna; and it has enabled us to explain the purging of Typhoid fever, Dysentery and Tuberculosis by referring each to its specific ulceration of the intestine.

All this Morbid Anatomy has done, and it must do yet much more.

Cancer, and Albuminuria, and Epilepsy, and Paralysis, and Insanity all need & demand further and more careful investigation, and it is from Morbid Anatomy that we may with the greatest likelihood expect the solution of the difficulties which all of them still present.

Next to Morbid Anatomy, Physical Diagnosis must be mentioned as a great source of the Recent advances in Medicine; for Physical Diagnosis would have been of little value without the accurate Knowledge of Disease which Morbid Anatomy procured, and Morbid Anatomy could have produced comparatively few practical results, had not Physical Diagnosis enabled us to recognize during life the diseases with which it had made us familiar.

Of the great importance of Phys: Diagnosis, I feel that it is quite unnecessary to speak; for the Experience of every day is teaching us all how invaluable is the aid it affords in the detection of disease. I need only refer to the precision and accuracy and ease with which diseases of the Heart and Lungs are recognized by means of it, and to its great importance and frequent use in Ovarian and Uterine diseases.

Under this head, the Microscope deserves special mention: To it we are indebted for many of the advances in Morbid Anatomy of which I have been speaking, and chiefly by means of it must we expect the further progress in that department which I have been anticipating.

But, in addition to this, as a means of Diagnosis its value is great indeed: In the Examination of Urinary Deposits, for Example, it gives us invaluable aid, by shewing the form of the Crystalline sediment,

and by revealing the presence of Blood, Pus, Epithel=
=ium or Tube-casts

In the Examination of the Blood, it detects Leucocythaemia by demonstrating the superabundance of the Colourless corpuscles.

In Diseases of the Stomach, it reveals the Sarcinæ ventriculi, and in Diabetes, the Torulæ — both — the vegetable products of Fermentation and Decomposition;

It has proved that the essence of many Cutaneous Diseases is the presence of an Animal or Veget=able parasite, — particularly it has demonstrated the vegetable character of Favus, and has made us familiar with the habits and propensities of the Acarus Scabiei:

And although the Microscope ~~cannot~~, alone and unaided, ~~cannot~~ does not enable us to decide as to the nature of a suspicious growth, yet the minute structure as revealed by it, when taken in Connection with the other Circumstances of the case, furnishes very important information, and demands very careful consideration in our decision as to the nature of the disease.

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To Recent advances in Chemistry, Medicine is not a little indebted, and to it do we look most hopefully for further and greater progress.

The Chemistry of Therapeutics has of late years made great progress — especially in giving us the active parts of Crude Vegetable drugs in the most convenient and most efficient form of the vegetable alkaloids:

I need only mention Tannin for Galls, Strychnine for Nux Vomica, Atropine for Belladonna, Digit=aline for Digitalis, and, above all, Quinine for Cinchona and Morphia for Opium.

Our Knowledge of the Chemistry of Health - of the processes which go on normally in the living lab=oratory within us — is gradually, though slowly, extending:

And our Knowledge of the Chemistry of Disease is extending too: Look how much it has already done for Medicine; It has taught us, for example, to consider the presence of Albumen in the Urine as almost invariably a proof of disease of the Kidneys, and, arguing from the speedy decomposition of Urea after its secretion, it has explained Uræmic poisoning as very probably due to the premature decomposition of the accumulated urea, and the consequent circulation of Carbonate of Ammonia in the blood.

Let me repeat that it is in this direction more than in any other that we must chiefly and most hope-fully look for new discoveries & for greater progress.

Organic Chemistry is advancing every day; the tangled mass of facts and figures of which it seems at present to consist will all be arranged yet in their connection and order; and their beauty will be seen in their harmony and their results:—

for Vital Chemistry cannot but advance along with it, and then Pathological Chemistry is sure to follow: —— And if its first-fruits are so valuable, What may we not expect from its further development?

So much then for the recent progress of Scientific Medicine; altho' other sources, and many other proofs of it might have been ~~given~~ mentioned.

Such and so great progress in Medicine as a Science necessarily implies corresponding changes in Practical Medicine: Great changes there have been and great progress too, and, paradoxical though it may seem, progress chiefly by retrogression.

Just as a man is making progress who forms a more correct estimate of himself than he formerly had, even although that estimate be a lower one,

So Practical Medicine has been advancing by forming

a lower, but more correct, estimate of what it may attempt and of what it can accomplish

The first effect of these recent advances – especially those in Morbid Anatomy – was to give most hopeless and gloomy views of disease, and, by revealing organic changes, to shew the vanity of our supposed power to arrest or remove it: This was especially true of Tubercular Diseases, Pulmonary Emphysema, Valvular disease of the heart, Apoplexy, Bright's Disease, and Cirrhosis.

But from this shaking of our confidence in the capabilities of Medicine & the efficacy of supposed remedies there resulted a double good: —

Attention was more specially directed to the alleviation of the Diseases which we did not now expect to cure, And we gradually learned how much unaided Nature can often effect towards the cure of apparently hopeless disease.

That it is the duty of the Physician to be the servant and the assistant of Nature is the old and invaluable but much neglected lesson which Fevers, Phthisis, and Heart Disease have agreed convincingly to teach us; We have learned that it is Nature, not the Physician, who effects the cure: that the Physician ought to follow Nature's mode of Cure, not to coerce ~~Nature~~ her to follow ~~the~~ his;

~~superior~~ ~~mode he has devised~~ ~~& which he deems infinitely~~ ~~preferable~~ ; And that his proper duty is to watch closely the indications of Nature, and, when necessary, to aid her in fulfilling them.

It is no small advance to have learned how much Nature can effect, in what circumstances she requires and can gain by the assistance of Medicine, and what diseases are so far beyond the reach of both that palliation alone can be at-tempted : But besides this great negative advantage, much positive good has resulted to Practical Medicine from the recent advances in the subsidiary sciences on which it is based.

Above all, Chemistry has given us the inestimable boon - Chloroform, in praise of which it is as needless to speak at all, as it is impossible to speak too highly : And Physiological Chemistry has taught us how to cure Scurvy & Dyspepsia, and how to alleviate at least Diabetes & Diseases of the Digestive Organs, by dietetic treatment.

I have already pointed out how important is the aid we obtain from Phys: Diagnosis in the detec-tion of disease, and how it gives certainty and precision to our Views by correcting or confirming the opinions derived from a study of the Symptoms ; And as an accurate Diagnosis is the essential pre-requisite

for correct treatment, we see that Phys. Diagnosis has contributed, not less although less directly to the advance of practical Medicine than either Chemistry or Morbid Anatomy.

Having said so much about the recent progress of scientific Medicine, and the consequent ~~progress~~ advance of Medicine as an art, I need not stay to prove that the true way to advance Practical Medicine is to advance these subsidiary sciences, of which it is the constituted combined practical result

Let me only say that in the fields of research which these subsidiary sciences present there is room for a far greater number of labourers, and that careful study and observation in any of them cannot fail to yield results which shall be alike honorable to the investigator, and valuable to Medical Science

I need only mention the names of Carswell, Owen Marshall Hall, Carpenter, Bennett and Reid to prove this & to prove also that the R. M. S has borne its part in such labours, and has reaped its full share of such distinction

Let these names stimulate us to act worthily of such predecessors, and to labour as carefully & as well!

But it is important for us not only to have correct and comprehensive views of the present state of Medical Knowledge, and of the general condition of our Profession, but likewise to know something about those who practise it. Let us glance very shortly at the present state of Medical Practice and Medical Practitioners.

And we notice first that they are almost outnumbered by a host of Charlatans & Quacks: Not that this is peculiar to the present day, for doubtless there were Professor Holloways" & Medical Herbalists in the days of Hippocrates just as now, and just as there ever will be while Medicine is imperfect, but of late years Quackery has taken full advantage of the Transition state of Medicine and has become a great social evil

It is merely strange how little is needed in order to become a successful Charlatan; for the public is indeed "a most credulous monster"; — A modicum of truth, a lively imagination, and unlimited impudent boldness cannot fail to procure success.

A modicum of truth is needed to give plausibility to the system by starting from some generally admitted doctrine, — but a very modicum suffices:

A lively imagination is essential to picture in glowing language the ravages of the fell Disease, and to

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proclaim the greatness of the Deliverer who has arisen;

And if in addition to this, by a powerful effort of imaginative genius, there can be produced the portrait of a Doctor in familiar conversation with a scythe-bearing skeleton, success will be speedy & unbounded

But limitless, unblushing, mendacious boldness is the most needful of all: In this respect the miracle of Mahomet seems the very perfection of Quackery. He caused it to be proclaimed abroad that on a certain day he would compel a mountain to come to him, and that he would offer prayers from its summit for all his true followers: In the presence of the assembled multitude Mahomet commanded the hill to come to him, and reiterated the command in vain: When, instead of being abashed and disconcerted by its disobedience, he only said "Well "if the hill will not come to Mahomet, Mahomet will "go to the hill". Doubtless the people were satisfied that the hill had some good reason for refusing to come, and, rejoicing that they had been the objects of the prophet's all powerful prayer, they dispersed proclaiming "Allah is great, & Mahomet is his prophet".

Am I speak of Homeopathy and Hydropathy under the head of Quackery? We cannot help noticing that each possesses the modicum of truth — the one being founded on the value of pure air and

pure water, and the other apparently existing, altho' perhaps unconsciously, on the well-known influence of the mind over the body; And that to believe that the cures which Nature has effected are due either to wet blankets or infinitesimal doses requires no feeble imagination, and to proclaim it small degree of boldness.

Charlatanism must abound so long as Medicine is an imperfect science, and so long as men are to be found who are ready to sacrifice truth, and the health or lives of their neighbours to their own aggrandizement: Only let us remember that the ignorance and errors of regular practitioners are quoted by such men as their best advertisements, therefore let us take care that are earnestly preparing for the difficulties of practice and may never be guilty of thus aiding imposture and disgracing regular Medicine.

But there are many cases, both in Medicine & in Surgery, which present enigmas that cannot be explained, and difficulties which cannot be overcome. This admitted impotence of Medicine in many cases, as well as the changes which it has been recently undergoing, and the alleged ignorance of many of its practitioners have of late furnished the pretext for many fierce

attacks on our Profession, and much bitter calumniation of its members; but these illnatured accusers have been chiefly distinguished for by their utter ignorance of the subjects of which they wrote, and by the self sufficient & contemptuous tone which such ignorance always produces. Such charges – from such quarters – furnish their own refutation, and the defence of our profession from such assailants may be safely left with those from whom it renders so much self denying and unrequited service. We are guilty of undue praising our Profession when we say, that the great mass of Medical Practitioners are upright and honorable men – actuated by the best motives, and discharging their professional duties in a way worthy of these motives, – with credit to themselves and benefit to their patients.

Yet it is but too true that many practitioners are imperfectly qualified for the duties of the Profession: Thus, I have seen a bruise supposed to be a fracture, and a fracture supposed to be a bruise: I have seen the friction which follows inflammation of the sheaths of the tendons mistaken for the crepitus of a fractured fore-arm, and an abscess of the Vulva mistaken for an urgent case of Strangulated Hernia.

One fruitful source of this is Specialism: I do not mean that Specialism which is nothing else than Quackery – which is well said to have "the Rectum as its favorite and most appropriate seat" – and which is professes sometimes to cure "Fistula without cutting", ~~sometimes~~ or "Hernia without Trusses", ~~sometimes~~ or "Syphilis without mercury", (the treatment in the last of these, by the way, generally consisting in profuse salivation induced by Corrosive Sublimate) but I mean that Specialism which is so common in the Regular Profession — a limitation of one's study and practice almost exclusively to a special branch of Medicine – to the neglect of the other branches. I admit that it is necessary for the advancement of Medical Science that each department should have its special students, and the range of Medicine is so extensive that no man can be a Master in all departments, but he has no right to purchase Superiority in one, at the expense of ignorance in the rest. This is too often done, and when such a one is unexpectedly called upon to act in another department than his own his ignorance becomes apparent, and his own reputation and that of his profession suffer in consequence: — thus, the experienced oculist is baffled by a ~~case of~~ Spasmodic stricture, – the accomplished accoucheur is found unable to

reduce a dislocation or a Hernia, — And the operating Surgeon or the Experienced Physician are alike puzzled by a case of Malpresentation or retained Placenta. These things ought not so to be; the Medical man must be thoroughly qualified to undertake any professional duty, and if he devote himself to the special practice as well as the special study of any one department, let him shew that he has another reason for doing so than ignorance of the departments he is eschewing.

If then this be the professional standard at which we are to aim, and to which we must attain let us see to it that we are earnest & diligent in our preparation now, and so combining Practical Knowledge with Scientific acquirements, that we shall be found ready for every emergency, and may procure honor for Medicine & for ourselves while doing good to our fellow men.

But if we would practice Medicine with success we need far more than Professional Knowledge — so much more that it is almost as true of the Physician as of Poet, "Nascitur, non fit":

We need patience, gentleness & humanity; we need habits of close observation & careful deduction; we need shrewdness and self reliance & self denial: And we preeminently need that highest moral

principle which is the best security for the right discharge of ~~any~~ the duties of any station, and without ~~the duties of no~~ which no duty can be rightly performed — a constant eye to the Glory of that God "in whom we live & move & have our being". Listen to the noble admonition of Thomas Sydenham, "the Father of English Medicine" —

"Whoever takes up Medicine should seriously
" consider the following points: firstly, that he must one
" day render to the Supreme Judge an account of the lives of
" those sick men who have been intrusted to his care.
" Secondly, that such skill & science as, by the blessing of
" Almighty God, he has attained, are to be specially directed
" towards the honor of his Maker, and the welfare of his
" fellow creatures; since it is a base thing for the great
" gifts of Heaven to become the servants of avarice or
" Ambition. Thirdly, he must remember it is
" no mean or ignoble animal that he deals with.
" He may ascertain the worth of the human race since, for
" its sake God's Only-begotten Son became man, and thereby
" ennobled the nature that he took upon him.

Lastly, he must remember that he himself hath no exemption from the common lot, but that he is bound by the same laws of mortality, and liable to the same ailments and afflictions with his fellows.

For these, and the like reasons let him shine

" to render aid to ~~his~~ the distressed with the greater care
" with the kindlier spirit, and with the stronger
" fellow-feeling."

If we are actuated by motives like these, and if we live worthily of them, we shall obtain not merely professional success, but blessings infinitely greater: — we shall obtain the approbation of our own consciences, and the esteem of our fellowmen, and at the end we shall receive the soul satisfying "Well done" of Him whose approbation alone can confer true and unending happiness.

S. Yellowlees.

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