

A few remarks on the practice of medicine / By a general practitioner.

Contributors

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from the Author

A

FEW REMARKS

ON THE

PRACTICE OF MEDICINE.

BY

A GENERAL PRACTITIONER.

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of Greenwich.

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1843.



THE following observations are written for
the purpose of offering a feeble assistance
to the cause of Medical Reform.

The following observations are written for
the purpose of offering a feeble assistance
to the cause of Medical Education.

REMARKS, &c.

AT a time when the state of the Medical Profession is about to undergo the consideration of the Legislature, a few remarks from a practical man may not be out of place.

Many years of unceasing application to medical practice amongst all grades, and under all circumstances, have, it is presumed, enabled the writer of these observations to form a tolerable judgment of the best mode in which the Profession of Medicine can be pursued; and his object is to endeavour to show that the present Institutions, viz.—

The Hall for the preparation and sale of Medicines,

The College of Physicians, and

The College of Surgeons,

may, by a slight change, be made amply sufficient for the regulation of all medical practice; and to encourage this practice in its original spirit and purity, that benevolence and science may go hand in hand together in the relief of suffering humanity.

The change here suggested is the following:—

1st. That on account of Medical Men refusing to call themselves Apothecaries, as being injurious to

them, it is desirable that the Apothecaries' Hall should not be the tribunal of Medical Proficiency, but be continued as an emporium for Medicines, and be made a place of qualification for the Druggist, under the name of Druggists' Hall; the word Apothecary (which, if it has any meaning, applies to the Druggist) being altogether discontinued.

2nd. That the College of Physicians should be at the head of all medical practice, and admit a class of members who should be called Physicians, but not "Doctors:" which class should be at liberty to become general practitioners, and be eligible for the "Doctorship" after a certain amount of experience.

3rd. That the College of Surgeons be, as it now is, at the head of all surgical practice; this Institution being the most perfect of the three.

It is presumed that this arrangement would be for the advancement of science, the good of the public, and the honor and welfare of the medical profession.

It appears then to the writer, that the Members of the Medical Profession may be advantageously divided into three classes: viz.—

1st. Druggists.*

2nd. Physicians and Surgeons.†

3rd. *Doctors* of Physic and Surgery.‡

* The business of the Druggist being essentially medical, there seems to be no good reason why his calling should not be considered, in the third degree, as a branch of the Medical Profession.

† It will be seen in these remarks, that the term "Physician" has been applied to all Medical Men, and not confined to the "Doctor of Medicine."

‡ Why should there not be Doctors of Surgery? It is presumed

The business of the Druggist should be to select, prepare, and sell publicly, medicines for the profession and the public, and to dispense prescriptions. It seems reasonable, also, if no Physician or Surgeon were at hand, that the Druggist should be allowed to administer, in the best manner he was able, to any emergency, or to any casual or trifling ailments at his own house at the time of application, but on no account to take upon himself the management of continued diseases, nor attend patients.

The Physicians and Surgeons should be the general Medical Practitioners to prescribe for diseases, to attend the sick and maimed, and to administer medicines and applications; but never to encroach upon the province of the Druggist by preparing or selling medicines, but simply to dispense in a private manner, and supply, to their patients only, such remedies as the cases might require; or, if they chose, to prescribe, and let the Druggist dispense.

The *Doctors* of Physic and Surgery should be Physicians and Surgeons of not less than twenty years' standing; and whose superiority should consist in nothing but their experience; who might be consulted by the Public or the Profession in all cases at pleasure; but who must on no account be allowed to supply medicines, nor be paid in any other manner than by fees.

that the title of Doctor has no more connexion with Physic than it ought to have with Surgery, or any other profession.

QUALIFICATIONS. The Youth intended for a Druggist—after receiving a sound and partially classical education—should be made to understand, that though he can have nothing to do with the higher walks of the medical profession, yet that, nevertheless, his situation in life will be a responsible one, as the efficacy of the Physician's prescription will much depend on the goodness of his medicines, and the accuracy of his preparations; and that, as far as these are concerned, he is involved with the Physician in the great responsibility which belongs to the treatment of disease. He should therefore be apprenticed or articed to a Druggist of repute, for about five years, or perhaps less; at the end of which time, he should attend one or more courses of Lectures on Chemistry, Botany, and the Materia Medica, when he would be eligible for examination at the "Hall;" and if capable of getting a certificate of proficiency, he should be at liberty to commence business at once.

The qualification of the Physician and Surgeon must differ greatly from this: it must be of a higher order and much more extensive. The Youth intended for the practice of Medicine and Surgery, should be informed, as accurately as possible, of the nature of the profession he is about to undertake. It has been sometimes represented as a light easy calling, and one in which a fortune was sure to be made with very little pains: instead of which it is usually most laborious, often vexatious, and sometimes distressing, as well as being most uncertain in regard to prosperity.

The young Physician should be told that the main object of his existence is to relieve human misery ;— he should be made fully to understand, if it may be so expressed, the sacredness of his calling, and that with the vanities and lighter pursuits of life he has but little to do ; that Medicine is a comprehensive term, and includes all those means which humanity and science can dictate in the relief of bodily or mental anguish ; that he must never trifle with human life, nor lightly and inconsiderately administer potent remedies ; that he must guard against the love of Operative Surgery, that an operation may never be recklessly or thoughtlessly undertaken.

In the earlier times it is probable that this noble profession was practised from motives of pure philanthropy, and without fee or reward ; but as its laborious character in modern times does not admit of this, still the young Physician should be taught to consider the pecuniary advantages as a secondary object only, and that his grand principle of action should be the earnest desire to do good, and that the poor have the strongest claims upon his talents and charity : he should be familiar with their dwellings, and make himself well acquainted with their habits and feelings : he may be assured that he is capable of being often a real blessing to the needy, and those that have none to help them ; and that time so employed cannot fail of obtaining a rich reward of mental satisfaction. He should remember, also, that the poor are not always confined to the lower classes of society, but

that there are many situations in life where virtual poverty exists under respectable appearances, and where the exercise of his benevolence would confer much comfort and benefit. Demands for medical attendance have often pressed heavily upon the slender means of many; and it is an evil which every Physician should endeavour, by all means in his power, not to inflict.

It is wise to get rid of the golden dream which has induced many to enter the Medical Profession, such having often awoke to severe disappointment; and upon this ground it is highly desirable that every young Physician should have a small independence, and not be compelled to trust entirely to his profession for support in life; for in this case, every adverse circumstance will tell fearfully upon the feelings of the anxious and conscientious man: while in those of less tender conscience, want of means might give rise to unworthy practice, by calling forth the exercise of ingenuity to take advantage of the weakness of mankind, instead of acting upon the grand principles of science and benevolence, and might also give an obsequiousness to the behaviour, a deference to common opinions, for the sake of pleasing, which should on no account belong to the character of a Physician: in short it is a serious additional evil to a profession already abounding with too many.

The ordinary duties of religion may be very much interfered with by the profession of medicine; but the young Medical Man may be assured that his calling,

if practised upon sound principles, may be made a life of practical religion, and one in which he may do his full duty to God and man.

It is scarcely necessary to observe, that a Physician should be, in every sense of the word, a good character. Unbounded confidence is often placed in him, which he must never betray; and if he is extensively called upon in his profession, he is generally in possession of a volume of knowledge which to all the world must be a sealed book.

It is of no small importance to the Medical Practitioner that he should be healthy. The practice of Medicine and Surgery, especially if combined with attendance at the birth of children, is a real and painful burthen to an ailing man. In no calling does the necessity for "a sound mind in a sound body," exist to a greater degree than in the practice of medicine. In Divinity, Law, and all other professions, the members have their hours, days, and weeks of leisure: such relief is seldom afforded to the Practitioner of Physic; it is more unceasing than any other calling, and at times a very severe strain upon mind and body, making it highly necessary that the Professor of Medicine should be strong in both. Great exposure to all kinds of weather by night and day,—the necessity for exertion when the body is exhausted, and for vigorous mental efforts when the mind is worn and enfeebled, are amongst its evils; and when added to by a natural anxiety for the result of his endeavours, both as regards the patients' well-doing

and his own reputation, require in the Physician that strength of mind and body, without which he could scarcely have a calm temperament and cheerful disposition,—qualities of great moment in the medical vocation,—for the young Practitioner should be told that he must make up his mind to lead a life very different from that of any other person. In the exercise of his profession he will see much of good and evil; he will witness the various workings of the human mind under circumstances the most trying; and often have to contend against prejudice and ignorance in a way that will severely test his religion and philosophy. He must be enjoined to meet this with calmness and reason, and, if these fail him, to endeavour to return good for evil. He must remember that under pain and distress human nature is often unreasonable, and try to look upon human failings with compassion.

The young Physician must therefore be prepared to endure very great interruption to his personal comfort. As it has been before remarked, great fatigue and anxiety are the inseparable attendants upon a large medical practice: rest and refreshment are subjected to the greatest irregularity, and there is often so unceasing a demand upon mind and body, that a medical man's life is one continued hurry, and the more celebrity he gains the harder he must work: this disadvantage applying only partially to any other calling. He will sometimes have the misfortune to have his best feelings and intentions mistaken, so

that where he has been most desirous of conferring a benefit, he receives in return ingratitude and injury. He will sometimes find that with the most zealous exercise of his skill and attention, disease will be untractable, and the failure of his efforts productive of much mortification. He will also be occasionally liable to vexatious attendances on illness, where his hands will be completely tied by the fancied medical knowledge of the patient or the family, who have either read medical works, or had the power of seeing many medical men, and hearing their various opinions, from which they have drawn erroneous conclusions respecting the treatment of disease, and which they so firmly adhere to, that they endeavour to direct the Physician instead of yielding quietly to his advice; they will often argue every point with him, and, after making him explain all that he means to do, will object to every remedy he proposes.

The young Practitioner should be told that in the Profession of Medicine he must be a student through life: that there is no such thing as perfection of knowledge in this science; and that what is called skill is not to be attained in two or three years by books, lectures, and other means of education, but by perfecting his theories by thinking for himself,—by observing accurately the phenomena of disease, and applying the powers of a well-instructed mind in drawing safe conclusions;—that general principles must be so modified and adapted to the particular case, as to put the patient under the most favorable

circumstances for recovery ; the Physician always remembering that it is not *he* who cures the disease, but that his correct judgment assists nature.

It is hazardous to become the imitator of any peculiarity in a leading man. Politeness and rudeness, gravity and gaiety, nicety and slovenliness, have all been, at times, the characteristics of popular Physicians ; and if these strictly belong to the temperament of the individual, and are combined with sound judgment, they may serve to make the possessor more notorious, but can in no respect make him a better Physician : these singularities should, therefore, never be assumed or imitated by the young Practitioner.

It has been said that a Physician should be familiar with the habits and feelings of the poor, and this will be always in his power ; but it is also highly desirable that by good association he should be conversant with the habits of the wealthy, the learned, and the distinguished of all kinds : for unless a Physician can feel perfectly at home in all classes of society, there might exist a shyness in the presence of persons of high condition which would interfere with the bold and efficient exercise of his profession ; and this is also a principal reason why a Medical Man should have a good education ; it gives confidence when acting amongst scholars and gentlemen, and makes him feel, that independent of his professional knowledge, he is in no respect their inferior in other attainments ; for amongst the great he should be unabashed, though unassuming, as in the abodes of

the destitute he should be charitable, tender, and free from pride.

Though much that has been said might tend to discourage young men from entering on the profession of Medicine and Surgery, yet something may be added, in respect to its advantages, which might stimulate and encourage them to the undertaking. In the first place, its singleness of character stands out in bright relief to the more complicated interests and pursuits of other callings. The Physician should be the slave of no sect ; the partizan of no policy. In his simple and serviceable duty he should go about endeavouring to do good, regardless of the characters or conditions of men. He can be the friend of all mankind ; for the rich and the poor, the good and the bad, should alike meet with his attention and assistance. He sees more of the equality of human nature than any other man, and should look with a more equal eye upon all. His power of serving mankind is very great : and in the honest and zealous exercise of his profession, he may reasonably hope to enjoy the esteem of the great and the good, and also to secure a moderate provision for the support of a family, or the wants of age : it might lead him to the palace, and even ennoble his line. The troubles of the profession are much relieved by the consideration in which the Physician is held by all grades of society : he may feel that in the exercise of his profession he is in his place everywhere, and that there is nothing above him or below him.

A little too much stress, it is thought, has lately been laid upon the *scholastic* education of a young Physician. This, doubtless, ought to be good, and such as gentlemen's sons commonly receive, but it should not be too long protracted, as this can never make a Medical Man, whose proper study, after the age of sixteen or thereabouts, should be Practical Medicine. The desire to relieve human misery is never greater, or less interested, than in early life: and when the more mature Physician is engaged with the better orders of mankind, how often has the young one been the agent of relief and comfort to the poor, and at the same time laid the best foundation for his own proficiency and professional success.

The youth intended for a Physician, after a full education at a good school, should enter at once upon the practical study of his profession. At about the age of sixteen, he should be placed as a pupil with a practising Physician, or at a public institution, for three years, that he might accurately understand the nature of medicines, and their composition for the relief of disease; he could also read and witness the treatment of many ordinary complaints, besides acquiring a knowledge of the treatment of accidents, and the mode of performing the minor surgical operations,—all these points being essentially necessary in the education of a Physician,—as well as that knowledge of human nature which early intercourse with the suffering portion of mankind will infallibly give. He should then commence a more systematic

mode of study to acquire the principles of his profession, by attending lectures, and associating, as much as he can, with the leading medical characters of the time; making himself also fully acquainted with the structure of the human body by dissection, and attending, as much as possible, to every kind of practice that hospitals could afford. Not less than two years, or seasons, should be spent in this manner, but three would be better, and at the age of twenty-two the young Practitioner, upon producing the requisite certificates should be eligible for examination at the Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons, where if he could pass, and get his authority to practise, he should be at liberty to announce himself to the world as a Physician, or Surgeon, or both; but if no good opportunity should exist for commencing practice, there should be no impediment to his becoming the assistant of another person, till he could settle himself favorably in life, when he should notify his calling to the public only by his name and profession, as follows,

Mr. _____ Physician.

or Surgeon.

or Physician and Surgeon.

If, in addition to these he makes the attendance upon childbirth his study and practice, he might assume the name of Natalist* or Birthman; but as

* This word, though, perhaps, defective in construction, the author has made use of as more expressive than those in common use: Man-midwife is ridiculous, and there is no reason why we should be indebted

what is called Midwifery belongs both to Physic and Surgery, there would be no need for any name to designate it by, as it would quickly be known if the Physician practised this branch of the Profession.

According to these remarks the best mode of practising Medicine would differ but little from that which is now pursued by what are called the General Practitioners of Medicine, whose attainments, if not in all cases as classical, are often more practically medical than those of many Doctors of Physic, and certainly ought to entitle them to a name by which their calling might be properly expressed, and for want of which almost every one feels it necessary to call himself Surgeon; which title may rightly belong to him by his Diploma from the College of Surgeons, but which alone by no means expresses the kind of practice in which he is principally engaged, for that being the practice of Physic, he should undoubtedly be called a Physician, the unmeaning and injurious word "Apothecary," being now, in private practice, almost universally discarded.

We now come to the "Doctor of Medicine." This should be a title of considerable dignity and importance, and, as the name implies, should belong to none but those who are capable of teaching or directing others. The qualifications of all Medical Men should be, as nearly as possible, the same, and the

to the French for the term "Accoucheur," which has no specific meaning. The best word, though it sounds somewhat harsh, is the Saxon "Birthman."

superiority of the "Doctor" should consist *entirely in his experience*. In other professions, this title is reserved for the heads and dignitaries of such professions, and not given to the beginner at the commencement of his career in life.

As scholars and gentlemen the Members of the College of Physicians rank high; but the laws attached to the title of "Doctor," as he is now constituted, are detrimental to the junior Physicians; for unless they become attached to public institutions, or unusually successful in private practice, they have not the advantages which fall to the lot of most of the general Practitioners.

The writer would then suggest, that NO PHYSICIAN SHOULD BE MADE A "DOCTOR" TILL HE HAD BEEN TWENTY YEARS IN CONSTANT MEDICAL PRACTICE. He would then have acquired very considerable knowledge in the treatment of diseases, and would be a proper person to apply to for advice and assistance under medical difficulties; and it is therefore proposed that at the age of *forty-two*, every Physician or Surgeon should be eligible, if he wished it, to become a "Doctor" of Physic or Surgery, under the authority of one or other of the Colleges; when his experience would make the title sit well upon him, and he would be a practical man, one to whom the public and the profession might look up to with confidence for as much assistance as the very imperfect science of Medicine can give.

It appears, then, that very little is wanting to place

the Medical Profession on its proper footing, and the required change consists principally in the three following points:—

1st. That the preparation and selling of Medicines be left entirely to the Druggist.

2nd. That the Practitioner of Medicine be called a Physician; and that he should be a Member of the College of Physicians, but without the title of “Doctor” till a certain period: that he should be also, if he chose (and it is very desirable), a Member of the College of Surgeons, which combination should form the general Practitioner of Medicine and Surgery.

3rd. That the “Doctor” of Medicine should be a Physician of twenty years’ standing.

There is little doubt but that the grand stumbling-block to the Medical Practitioner belonging to the College of Physicians, would be the supplying his patients with medicines and applications; this it would be almost impossible to avoid, but if the private manner, before alluded to, was enforced, the dignity of the College would be in no degree lessened by having such members:* always remembering that such Physicians could never become “Doctors” while they continued that mode of practice; but they would be a class of such high respectability, that the “Doctor” being above them would, instead of being

* This class should first be composed of the existing Members of the Medical Profession, and afterwards regulated by such laws as the College might think proper.

degraded by such fellowship, become more elevated than before, especially as the College of Physicians would regulate the education and general qualification of its own members, of which the class here proposed ought to form the bulk. There should be no impediment to the junction of Physic and Surgery,—indeed, in the common practice of Medicine it would be almost impossible to separate them,—the young Medical Man would, therefore, find it necessary, for the most part, to be a Member of both Colleges; though in very populous places some few might wish to practise these branches of the profession separately, especially upon becoming a “Doctor.”

A word or two may be said upon medical charges. This has always been a subject of difficulty, and most will admit that there is no good or uniform way to make these satisfactory to the various feelings and opinions of the public. The Druggist, of course, can charge only for his medicines as matters of trade, but a nominal value has been given to medicines by Medical Men, to remunerate them for their skill and attendance; and though, at first sight this appears to have many objections, yet it is not after all so bad a plan as many have thought it to be, for though all systems are liable to abuse, yet in the hands of men of principle, the supply of medicines will generally be in proportion to the severity of disease; and there is no plan that so well excludes the idea of payment during the attendance, which, in the treatment of illness, should be the last thing thought of. Per-

haps it is better that every Physician and Surgeon should charge in that manner which is best understood between him and his patients. Upon becoming a "Doctor" all irregular charges, and the supplying medicines, must, of course, cease; he is then the consulting Physician or Surgeon, and must be paid entirely by fees.

The practice of Natalism, or the attendance of men at the birth of children, has been, in a great degree, forbidden by the College of Physicians to its members, and has been objected to altogether by others, and certainly with some show of reason; but it ought to be allowed, as there is one argument in favor of it which appears to be unanswerable, viz. that circumstances will often occur where the aid of men could not be dispensed with, and if they were not familiar with ordinary cases, they could never be effective agents in difficult and dangerous ones.

In the suggestions here thrown out, it is not intended to interfere with those already in practice in either of the departments of medicine, unless at their own wish; but it should be permitted to every regular Practitioner of Medicine to call himself a Physician, and those of twenty years' standing should be eligible for the "Doctorship," but allowed to remain as ordinary Physicians if they preferred it.

Upon the foregoing plan it is thought that the nature of medical practice would be well defined; and as this could be easily done, it is to be regretted

that the time of Parliament should be taken up in arranging a matter which its members cannot well understand, but which could be much better settled by the existing authorities—the Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons.

that the names of the persons who should be taken up as
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