

**Address delivered at the annual meeting of the South Midland Branch of the British Medical Association, June 29th 1869 / by William Newman.**

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# ADDRESS

DELIVERED AT THE  
ANNUAL MEETING  
OF THE  
SOUTH MIDLAND BRANCH

OF THE  
British Medical Association,

JUNE 29th 1869.

BY  
WILLIAM NEWMAN,  
*M.D., Lond. F.R.C.S. Eng.*  
PRESIDENT FOR 1869-70.

Stanford:  
LANGLEY, PRINTER AND PUBLISHER, HIGH-STREET.

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1869.

ADDRESS  
DELIVERED AT THE  
ANNUAL MEETING

OF THE  
SOCIETY OF MEDICAL DRUGGISTS  
OF THE

ROYAL MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

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BY  
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M.D., F.R.C.S. (Ed.)

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1869



D. Ward

With the Author's  
Kind Complts —

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GENTLEMEN,

I take the position to which I have been nominated as your president for the ensuing year with mingled feelings of satisfaction and regret.—Well satisfied indeed with the honour so conferred, for no compliment can be so well worth wearing as that which represents the opinions of those who alone are competent to estimate daily medical life and work ; regret at the same time, truly enough, that I have so little to offer you either in material or in delivery, which will be likely to add to the charm of this our Annual Meeting.

It is usual on these occasions, that your Chairman should deliver an address, and for subject matter that should carry somewhat of interest with it, I have hesitated long; very many topics would have formed fitting material, but as trenching on common ground, I have rather preferred to speak of the interior economy of our profession and our position in reference to the public. It is no unmeaning phrase to ask your indulgence for the shortcomings of my speech, and to beg that you will bear with the few words I shall deliver as suggestions for after thought, far more than as carrying with them even a trace of that authority which so many of my predecessors in this chair might well claim at your hands for their utterances.



We are professors of the "Science and Art of Medicine and Surgery," and therefore stand in the very closest relation to the public weal,—our profession is one to which we may one and all be proud to belong, having for its end the well-being and comfort of our fellow creatures, and affording ample scope for the exercise of kindness and culture. It is second only to that high ministering Office which deals with the mysterious relation between man and his God; while it may surely claim precedence before the profession which is linked with legal subtleties and misty rules of court procedure, as much as, were the choice a possible alternative, the health of the body would be preferred by any one to the acquirement of material wealth. Pointed out to me, indeed, since much of this address was written, I have ventured to copy in a foot-note, the eloquent phrase of an accomplished preacher, bearing directly on the question before us :\*

It is a somewhat mis-applied term to speak of the Science of Medicine—for a Science, as words are now used, implies something definite and fixed—an erection of thought and mental labour on a well defined and firm basis, a monument of human industry closely bound round with exact enquiries, so arranged that a novice

\*" Seek those things which are above."—What a solemn word to those who are deciding their line of work for life. Why not ask yourselves brethren, what is really the highest and best work? Answer that question, not by what you know of the world's opinion, but what you know of the will of your God: If for instance you are hesitating between law and medicine, it must be admitted that modern English Society seems to award a social premium to law: yet, surely the study of the frame-work of God's noblest earthly creature, is a higher study than that of any system of human jurisprudence, dashed as every such system must be by human caprice, by human short-sightedness, by human error. Surely the practice of a profession, almost every activity of which is a fresh corporal work of mercy, must have an unceasing attraction for those who in the moral sense of the expression, "seek things above".—Pardon me brethren if I speak too boldly in a matter on which there may fairly be difference of judgment, but I venture to hope—nay, to believe—that as public opinion becomes more christian, a higher, nay, the very highest social consideration will be every where assigned to the members of that noble profession of medicine, which ministers with one hand to the progress of advancing science, while with the other, it daily lavishes its countless deeds of unknown unacknowledged generosity and kindness on the sick and suffering poor."

University Sermons, H. P. Liddon, M.A., 1869.

Sermon, x. "*The Risen Life.*" p. 279.



may step by step follow out the problems and the data of those who have gone before him, and arrive by certain course at the results which have before been sketched out. Speak if you will of the Science of Chemistry, of Mathematics, of Engineering, but do not append the term to such a combination of ever varying conditions as is daily afforded to the busy practitioner of Medicine.

Medicine and Surgery are rather arts of the highest kind—Sciences only in the sense that they press into their service all exact knowledge, that they have no unstable foundations, and that they apply to the best interests and to the physical well-being of mankind, the discoveries which are from time to time made in other, though still cognate fields of knowledge.

If it were desired to state in few words, what our profession has done for the general welfare of mankind, the most ready and yet true answer would be, I think that it has kept alive a devotion to pure Science; that it has brought the valuable results of such enquiries home to the individual, has utilized them in meeting the exigencies of daily life, and has so contributed in no small degree, to raise both the appreciation and the standard of general knowledge. Look to the array of names of the highest scientific acquirement, who from the common starting point of a professional education, have done so much in varied lines of research: to those also, no insignificant number, who, still employed by the daily duties of their Profession, have found time to win the fellowship of our Royal Society and to add their quota to independent enquiry.

Far more wide-spread and equally deserving of mention is the personal and more immediate good due to the offices of the medical profession. Every village, every household, gives its impressive testimony to the value of such labours:

“Si monumentum quæris, circumspice.”



Medicine then in its widest sense an art of the highest kind, is pre-eminently the art of observation—not a mechanical obedience to certain well marked rules, but a constant daily working out by ever new mental combinations, how best to apply acquired knowledge to the unravelling of and to the best possible dealing with morbid phenomena.

The tangled skein has first to be set free, the clue needs to be sought for, and the symptoms must be mapped out with reference to their mutual inter-dependence one upon the other. These problems constantly before us, demand for their solution, good mental training, and afford fitting employment for the highest type of intellectual power: This too, whether they are considered from the standpoint only of the mental capacity employed, or from that afforded by a consideration of the serious issues which are involved: although in humble obedience, we allow that the absolute attainment of the results we would wish, is in very numerous instances beyond our reach.

But if the products of observation are to be worth recording; if they are to form material for future advance, it is above all imperative that “Truth” be considered both in the detail of observing, and in the promulgation of the decisions at which the enquirer may arrive: In this single requirement, and in the most implicit obedience to its wide demands, must surely exist the very touch-stone and key-note of all sound and honest professional work—“God’s Truth above every thing,—I live for that,” was the pungent phrase of the late John Goodsir in addressing his fellow-worker about the measurements of some skulls then under examination.

I have placed our noble profession on high ground and in this estimate you will agree with me. Its daily services are incalculable; its personal sacrifices for the good of others, are of no small amount: yet it were not too



strong phrase, to say that in almost directly *inverse* ratio to the benefits which the medical profession confers on the public, stands the appreciation which is meted out to us, and the status given to us in public estimation. Compare the social recognition freely afforded to the sister professions with that given to our own, and the grade on which we are placed is as a whole very decidedly less advanced. Let me guard myself against possible mis-apprehension. I speak of the *general* acknowledgment which the profession obtains, and I purposely leave untouched and unconsidered that much more private and personal position, which each man in his own sphere of action earns for himself. To few, if indeed to any, is so much of this latter heartfelt tribute awarded as to members of our profession, but it is granted to and for themselves alone.

In other callings courage, devotion to duty, clear-headed decision and breadth of acquirement have their rewards;—The successful Soldier; the painstaking plodding Lawyer—the acute Engineer, and the deeply read Scholar claim and win their meed from a critical public. Yet the very same qualities necessary to the most humble practitioner of our art, in his daily routine of work, in his decisions momentous enough to individuals, and indirectly therefore of interest to the whole community, evoke no response, and obtain for him no guerdon other than that of an internal consciousness of duty done.

This failure of due recognition social and general, must have efficient causes, and into these even a cursory enquiry may not be without its value.

The special demands of a professional life have material influence. The medical man, actively employed in his own sphere, is strangely isolated, and cut off from much of that intercourse with his fellow-men, which early education and habits would lead him to prize. Daily in contact with others, yet his inmost life has much of solitary character, and he is debarred from the fruition of social comfort by



broken hours, and enforced home residence.

His usual work is made up of so many infinitesimal details, spread over so much of space, and mixed up with the intimate concerns of so many different people, that the expenditure of mental power and the special skill required, fail to reach the public attention. The actions are linked essentially with secret home affairs, are carried on within the closed doors of a consulting room, have their field of exercise within the arcana of a sick chamber, with it may well be, the cognizance of no one person who reads aright the services so rendered.

Were one tithe of the energy thus expended, devoted to some continuous course of action, which should be in its working, and ends, '*coram publico*'; it were not too much to expect that the worker would be hailed with more genuine respect than is now accorded to our official labours.

From the very nature of the case too, the profession stands always on its trial, and that before a tribunal, which equally incompetent to collect or to weigh the evidence afforded, cannot be qualified to pronounce reliable judgment; the '*vox populi*,' fickle and vacillating, is no fitting index of the true value of medical work. Disappointment is inseparable from very much of our best effort, and apparent if unavoidable failure carries with it the risk of harsh construing, the imputation it may be even of an absolute incapacity. We are engaged in a never-ending conflict with that tendency to change and death, common to all animated forms, what wonder then if the contest end too often in defeat:—With I hope, very deeply seated consideration for the feelings of the agonized survivors, I do yet think that the very hardest phase of medical life is that one, where reproach, obloquy, and even insult, are heaped on the head of the practitioner, because he has failed to avert from some victim of subtle and ill-defined disease, the dreaded onslaught of death. And these very reproaches



whether they have or have not even a fragment of actual basis, still put into circulation, take away from the respect which is surely merited by honest though unsuccessful effort.

More however of misapprehension and distrust, is earned by the conduct of men in our own ranks, than can be fairly attributed to conditions which are inseparable from professional exertions—and if I may formularize the thought, I would say that in strict proportion to the observance of Truth, and its wide requirements, so is appreciation as a rule deserved. Thus we neglect Truth when we claim too much—for example, when yielding to the temptation, tacitly if not directly to assume in some given instance, that medical art has brought about the desired result, though such happy ending be really beyond the reasonable powers of medicine. Further also it is surely little short of an infraction of truthful speaking to adopt the phrase “*curing*” a disease: the old phrase has much of weight and depth,

‘*Medicus curat, natura sanat morbum.*’

To imply the possession of an active agency for good in any sense, other than as acting as directors and pilots, may lead to an ephemeral exaltation, but cannot pave the way to permanent advance in knowledge or position. The pendulum unduly drawn over, swings even further in the opposite direction, and to claim excessive credit in one instance, is to lose in some other the due acknowledgment we have earned.

Again, we profess and practise arts of high value, and the profession may with full justice ask a fitting remuneration for services rendered.

This question as it affects the physicians and surgeons of larger and smaller Hospitals, has not unfrequently been discussed in the columns of the medical press. I believe that honoraria ought to be afforded to all such officers, not in direct proportion to the time expended or to the patients



who are attended to, but as a simple acknowledgment of the work done. Unpaid services such as these exist only among our own ranks—the chaplains, the secretaries, and other officers, are all deemed worthy of material return—why should the medical men, upon whom the onus of the skilled attendance rests, and without whose co-operation these institutions could not exist, alone be unacknowledged? It is no exaggerated statement either, to maintain that such attendance, freely and ungrudgingly given, is not unfrequently looked on with suspicion and distrust, merely because it is avowedly rendered without fee or reward.

It is a strong temptation to subordinate our profession to the necessities of daily life, yet the status and the truthfulness of the corporate body are surely much weakened by artifices, whatever their kind, which tend to merge our daily calling into the position of a trade. With much apparent truth, the office of a profession may be defined as the affording counsel and advice in times of difficulty and need,—not the stretching out a ‘quid pro quo’ or the providing of a tangible something, in return for a tangible payment. These are the duties coupled with commerce, barter, or trade, not with the affording directions, verbal or written, for a special course of action. If not an infraction, at least that custom is an evasion of truthful action, which couples with the one, a necessary attention to the details of the other, and the position is false and untenable, which has wedded together in so many instances, the practice of the medical art, with the daily drudgery of the dispensing chemist.

Time cannot be lived twice over—the observation, comparison and personal culture, which are not merely ornaments, but absolute necessities of our existence as an establishment, urgently demand reasonable time. If mechanical supervision, or dry detail, occupy the time not spent by the bedside, it is not difficult to mark out the attention given to the note book or the library shelf, or



possible to avoid the impression, that valuable training has been gone through, to be stifled in after years by a senseless obedience to the trammels of an antiquated routine.

Nor is it less of a deliberate disobedience to what is right, that duties should be undertaken by members of our fraternity with the consciousness that they cannot be properly fulfilled. The contract system, as existing in the Poor Law and in the Club-regime, does not deserve much other description than the above. To combine a minimum (a fraction rather) of reasonable payment, with a maximum of possible requirement, is a gross injustice to all concerned. As matters now stand, the Poor Law Medical Officer really has a premium given to induce him (if he will) to favour mere routine treatment—to employ remedies, in a frequency proportioned to their small cost, regardless of the possible inefficiency of his services to the individual and to the State. It were, I fear but Quixotic to hope for any scale of payment which would be based on the plan of per case remuneration—but it must be conceded before long that the appointment of local dispensaries shall form an integral part of the union districts, and that salaries shall be regulated by some central authority, with the certainty of revision when circumstances demand it, and not be decided by the niggard caprice of local boards of irresponsible Guardians.

I fear to weary you with further detail, yet the truth were but half told if I omitted to name as a material and further reason for unsatisfactory status, the manifest oppositions as well as the internal feuds and animosities which are too rife among us :—For very much of this sad condition of things, the public however even more than the profession must directly be held responsible : Take for example our Courts of Law : In some disputed question, physicians of high repute give evidence on the one side in direct opposition to those on the other, and the value of



the scientific evidence is impaired by the fact that the skilled witnesses appear to be advocates each for their own party. Then too the dicta elicited are presented in much altered and very dubious light by the interposition and reading of the legal advocates, who are not uncommonly themselves unable to grasp the point of the evidence before the court. It were surely far better that the medical bearings of the contested issue, should form the subject of a distinct report agreed on by the witnesses called on each side; nor would this involve much serious difficulty: it would at least put the profession in its true light, and enable those who may be called on for evidence to wear the far more satisfactory aspect of skilled assessors, and not that of violent partizans.

The spectacle, happily less common of late years, is still unfortunately to be met with, where one of our profession appears as the direct opponent of the '*res gestæ*' of his neighbour, with reference to the treatment or to the charges in some special instance :

We accept with reasonable hesitation, the medical history given by an invalid; we question and cross question the patient and the friends, with the view of eliciting the truth, and very likely after all, accept the information so extracted with much of hesitation. Yet a garbled history of some medical dictum given by a dissatisfied patient, is allowed far too often a weight with us, which it does not for one moment deserve, a phrase transmitted without explanation is construed in the worst light, and a fabric of vexation and imaginary ill-doing is raised in the mind of the hearer, from an inadequate and untrue representation :

Hence, and from causes similar to the above, an atmosphere of distrust is not uncommonly engendered between two members of the profession, by the carelessness or mischievous intent of some non-professional tale-bearer.



Surely no profession should be so keenly alive to the honour of its separate members as our own, none so unwilling to believe aught to a brother's detriment, knowing how easily distorted statements may be made, and how a single misplaced word may alter the whole tenor of a reported conversation.

There are many links to bind us together in close relation, should not these be strengthened by every possible means, seeing that nothing is so detrimental to the good repute of any body of men, as the existence of what might in some cases almost be described as a state of internecine war. Depend upon it that the thunderbolts hurled against us as a body, are for the most part forged in our own armouries.

I have spoken with much regret of the want of general appreciation to which we are condemned, and I fear that like some bird of ill omen, I may seem to have occupied your time and wearied your patience, with a mournful catalogue of evil. But to have directed attention to some of the blots on the pure fame of our common and noble profession is surely a prelude to some possible determination to wipe them out. And to this good end, the action must be "individual,"—a positive resolution on the part of each one to maintain at all hazards, the high Christian rule "to do unto others as we would they should do unto us," and not to be dissuaded from such course of action, by the fear of possible mischance or of personal loss.

I have no faith in the powers or action of the Medical Council, even though that august body were to represent, by direct infusion of non-collegiate blood, more thoroughly the working elements of our profession.

I do not venture to recommend to your notice the establishment of Ethical Societies, in the vain hope that any adopted code of rules can make men more true to them-



selves or to their neighbours. I do not presume to dictate the following out of a certain course of action, but in the highest interest of our common Profession I would ask for careful painstaking discharge of our duties to the public, for thoughtful consideration to those within the pale, and for a steady unwavering resolve to uphold, each one for himself, the reasonable claims of honesty and Truth.

*Barn Hill House,  
Stamford.*

