

Remarks on the present state of the medical profession, shewing chiefly the necessity for the division of labour in its practice ... / [Leonard Stewart].

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to the
REMARKS
Medical Society of London
ON
THE PRESENT STATE
OF THE
MEDICAL PROFESSION,

SHEWING CHIEFLY
THE NECESSITY FOR THE DIVISION OF
LABOUR IN ITS PRACTICE.

BY
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ON THE DIVISION OF LABOUR

IN

MEDICAL PRACTICE.

THE general impression which is felt in favour of the division of labour, in most employments, has been sanctioned by such high authority, and is apparently so well founded; that to argue in favour of its application to the profession of medicine, may, at the first view, appear superfluous. Yet opinions to the contrary effect have been expressed, when the proper qualifications for the practice of this art were discussed; and assertions made, by well-known leading men too, unfavourable to its subdivision, even into the different branches which now commonly obtain among any crowded population. In op-

posing these sentiments, therefore, and in endeavouring to show good reasons why the art of healing should not retrograde, while other arts are carried forward by the refinement of the age, the author will not lay himself open to the charge of combating a shadow; or of advocating a cause, the truth of which was too obvious to stand in need of argument.

It is very true, (so wide is the diffusion of what is termed general information, and so great is the variety of knowledge which the average education of the day embraces,) that a foundation seems naturally laid for the opinion—that a sufficient acquaintance with all the branches of the healing art, may be readily gained by any person of common abilities, and the practice of them be united in the same individual. But it will be the aim of this essay to show, that there are circumstances, which must for ever prevent that result from being attainable, or even desirable, in great cities. And this,

not only with regard to the more abstract parts of the profession, which are generally allowed to require a greater degree of undivided attention, but also as to the practical parts ;—that is to say, wherever something is looked for beyond the mere rudiments of medical skill.

An attempt to enumerate all the kinds of knowledge, which are, in some way or other, connected with medicine, could be made only at the risk of commencing an endless “*Treatise de omni scibili*.” It would, perhaps, be more difficult to point out any great region hitherto travelled over by the human mind, from which this science does not enforce a tribute. And that there is no probable term to its further increase, is shown by the fact, that several of its most valuable acquisitions are of comparatively recent date ; as the late doctrines in chemistry and in physiology. But what is of more importance when we regard the future, the profession has shared in the enlightened spirit of the times. Medical men are less enthralled by traditionary prejudice, and more awakened to any proposed improvement in their art, than they have been at any former period.

Wishing then to place the question of the division of labour in medical practice upon its natural basis, it will be proper to argue, as if no such restraints existed as chartered companies or colleges. For even those who are opposed to them in principle, must be ready to admit, that, as a matter of course, all such institutions would, sooner or later, be overwhelmed and swept away, if they really opposed the strong tide of public utility.

Allowing then that some insight into the more important divisions of the healing art may reasonably be required of every practitioner; we will go further, and assert, that it is, in many cases, impossible to define the exact limits of each species of knowledge; and to point out where this one begins, and that one ends. They are as so many rays inclining to each other, and blending in a common centre. But this we say;—that to follow out any single line of these converging rays, necessarily leads to a distance from the rest. And, in plain language, that although one man may, from superior capacity, embrace a greater circle of general information than another; yet, if he ever wish to get

beyond this elementary knowledge, and arrive at excellence in any particular department of science, he must resolve to leave some, at least, of his early acquirements, less attended to than others.

We see that in schools, and those other sources of instruction, whence knowledge is supposed to flow, instead of a mingled stream, it is poured from divided channels. Professors are appointed, not to deal out a medley of learning, but to analyze the varied mass of information, and distribute it in parts. And although, perhaps, there have not been wanting instances, where men of great mental powers have been as well fitted for one chair in a medical college, as for another; yet, as a general rule, there would be no error in looking for a more accurate acquaintance with anatomy in the person whose business it was to teach it, than in the professor of chemistry. We should not be unreasonable if, when desirous of information concerning the relation in which the profession stands to the laws of our country, we applied to a lecturer on medical jurisprudence; and not to a teacher of botany.

But, (that we may not be accused of drawing our examples from institutions, which are thought to partake of the spirit of the past, rather than of the present day,) let us enquire—how is information communicated to the world, when there is no interference of authority with the wishes of individuals? How, for example, are books written? Is it most common to publish general dictionaries, or particular treatises? And even when dictionaries or encyclopedias are framed, is it usually by the same person?

These works, so useful in giving a fixedness to the floating information of the day, and marking the periodical advance of science, are generally too extensive for the grasp of a single mind. And indeed they are most valued when known to be compiled, in a great measure, by separate persons; or from different writers on distinct subjects. On the other hand, we daily find men employing, most usefully, their whole attention to illustrate some mere point in the wide circle of professional knowledge. And surely we do them no wrong when we suppose, that where they have most concentrated the

force of a well cultivated mind, they are the best informed.

There are many persons, that cannot but agree with these opinions, who yet think that such remarks apply merely to scientific medicine; or to those collateral pursuits, which must be followed up with a continued attention, and which require abstraction. It remains then to redeem our pledge of showing, that in practice also, when any thing like excellence is sought, duties too various should not be undertaken by the same person.

And, in the first place, it will be necessary to explain what we understand by abstract or dogmatic, and practical or experimental medicine. By the first, we mean all that is quite independent of the personal agency of the practitioner; which, whether called anatomy, physiology, chemistry, botany, or by any other name, whether recorded in books, or merely retained in the memory, is so much fixed knowledge, and can be communicated unimpaired to others. This is what we have all along called the scientific part of medicine. And it is important to distinguish it from the practical part, which is—

what is actually done by the medical man to aid his patient; and which, (be he a physician, a surgeon, or an accoucheur,) it is wrong to call a science. It is decidedly an experimental art; the art, say, of applying the medical sciences; the art of healing.

There is this constant and essential difference between science and art; that in the one, there are either certain fixed axioms, forming the basis of immense masses of knowledge; or some leading principles, to which may be referred innumerable dispersed facts: and these, when a little arranged, are readily formed into a system. Now nothing is more easily learned, than a system: and consequently, there are many persons, who go not themselves into the labyrinths of science, but yet have a key to them; who do not partake in the toils and difficulties of plodding men, but await the result of their labours; and, in this way, gain a general acquaintance with all the known branches of human knowledge; and would be ready for as many more, should they be invented. Thus, with regard to science, we often see the illustration of the old proverb—"One man builds a

house, and another man gets it and lives in it." But in art, each one must build for himself. Experience, discrimination, presence of mind, fertility of resources—all these are personal qualifications, and cannot be transferred. That practical skill, that exquisite *tact*, which decides so much in a crisis full of danger and of doubt, is above all law ; and, like equity, is a discretionary power, having no established rules, or fixed precepts.

Another marked distinction between science and art, must suggest itself to any one, who gives the subject a moment's consideration :—it is this ; that the former, being in its nature more definite and permanent, forms a fund to which subsequent additions can be continually made ; but the latter belongs to the individual, and frequently perishes with its owner. A man who cultivates any science, can take it up where his predecessor had left it ; but in art he must begin at the beginning : the one can be increased by aggregation ; the other must be generated. All this may be easily illustrated by directing our attention to the great progress made by the moderns in chemistry or in astronomy. This is,

besides, a knowledge so diffused, that it would enable a school-boy now, to *poze* all the sages of antiquity : but consider, on the other hand, the art of sculpture, or the art of prognosticating disease ; it may be doubted whether we have advanced one step !

While a student is occupied about the elementary parts of his profession, he may perhaps have no decided predilection for any one of its branches ; and can easily learn the rudiments of all. It would be tiresome to repeat our reasons why a certain acquaintance with various principles of medicine may be demanded of every one. This, we know, forms the basis of all examinations for degrees or licences to practise ; such scrutiny being made to ascertain how far the candidate has imbibed the science of his craft ; they cannot gauge his natural talent for it. We will then suppose our man examined and approved ; first gradually engaging in practice ; beginning with that common stock of information which all may acquire from schools or from books ; and then daily adding experience of his own. Can we suppose such a case, without concluding, that, after trying all kinds, he

will desire to apply himself to one sort of occupation, rather than to another; that he will, some time or other, find out his forte? He must have either a mind of very extraordinary power, or no mind at all, if such be not the result.

In a country village, or attached to a ship or to a marching regiment, the practitioner is obliged to hold himself in readiness for all kinds of duty; but that is not a good reason why he should do so, where the necessity does not exist. For ten or fifteen years, there is certainly no better means of exercising the talents, than to employ them in these various ways; but it is not going too far to say, that those who continue to frequent many paths, can make but little progress in any one. We may all venture to begin with a few comprehensive ideas of the various sciences; a few leading rules for common cases; (and these may be derived from the best sources;) but if ever we get out of leading-strings, and become distinguished for acquirements of our own; it must be from the more exclusive pursuit of some distinct branch of knowledge, or by the frequent exertion of a

peculiar talent. Thus we continually hear of persons who, though in general practice, are appealed to on account of their greater research or experience on certain points alone; and of others that have a reputation for adroitness or success, but only in particular experiments or operations. And, let it be remembered, we are arguing, not for such as are content with the mere routine of *business*; but for those by whom the territories of the profession are likely to be enlarged and improved.

That there really does exist, in some individuals, this superior aptitude for different divisions of an art so extensive as that of medicine, it will not be necessary to prove. For those even who believe in the hypothesis of Locke, "that the human understanding is at first quite free from all bias," must allow that it does not long remain so. Be the causes what they may, whether intrinsic or externally operating, it is certain that, at the period of active life at least, men greatly differ from each other. This one being more fitted for research, and that one for experiment; some getting a character for sagacity, and others for cleverness; one man making

a discovery, but his successor knowing better how to use it; and so on. Therefore to employ all these talents to the same purpose, to fill all these capacities alike, is surely absurd.

Hippocrates long ago said, that "Life is short, but art is long." Since his time, unfortunately, no plan, however popular, for extending the limits of human existence, has succeeded. And, although we have learned to compress the elements of every science into short and comprehensive schemes, no system has yet answered as a substitute for what, after the father of medicine, we have called art. Although bold men have told us, that nothing is easier than to strike a line, and put all low diseases below it, and all high ones above; and then raise or lower our patient as he falls below the right medium, or ascends above it; yet, in the conscientious exercise of our profession, we still find ourselves unhappily doomed to perpetual vigilance and care; while in the mean time new sources of difficulty, new situations, and new diseases have sprung up around us. Is this then the time to propose attacking, in the mass, the motley hosts of disease and death? Certainly,

if ever the maxim, "divide and conquer," were applicable, it is now.

The attainments necessary to form an enlightened practitioner in any one branch of the medical profession, are already sufficiently numerous; but were a person required to excel in all, he must rival in accomplishments the *beau-ideal* of a poet described in *Rasselas*. "Being now resolved," said Imlac, "to be a poet, I saw every thing with a new purpose; my sphere of attention was suddenly magnified; no kind of knowledge was to be overlooked." "To a poet, nothing can be useless. Whatever is beautiful, and whatever is dreadful, must be familiar to his imagination; he must be conversant with all that is awfully vast, or elegantly little." "The plants of the garden, the animals of the wood, the minerals of the earth, and meteors of the sky, must all concur to store his mind with inexhaustible variety." "All the appearances of nature, I was therefore careful to study; and every country which I have surveyed, has contributed something to my poetical powers." "But the knowledge of nature is only half the task of a poet; he must be acquainted with all the

modes of life. His character requires that he estimate the happiness and misery of every condition; observe the power of the passions in all their combinations, and trace the changes of the human mind, as they are modified by various institutions and accidental influences of climate or custom, from the sprightliness of infancy to the despondence of decrepitude." "He must divest himself of the prejudices of his age or country; he must disregard present laws and opinions, and rise to general and transcendental truths, which will always be the same." "His labour is not yet at an end; he must know many languages and many sciences." "Imlac now felt the enthusiastic fit, and was proceeding to aggrandize his profession, when the prince cried out, 'Enough! thou hast convinced me that no human being can ever be a poet.'"

Being quite of this prince's way of thinking, we shall second his remark, (though sensible of the anticlimax,) by stating it to be our opinion, that no one should ever continue to be a general practitioner, in the extended sense of the term, unless he could become, (as Mrs. Malaprop says,) "like Cerberus, three gentlemen at once."

But what cannot be effected by individuals, may be done, and, which is more, *is* actually done by a number of persons acting in concert. Nothing is necessary but mutual aid ; and a free interchange of intelligence. A physician who should attempt to stop a bleeding artery by the internal administration of a styptic ; and a surgeon who thought he could, at all times, cure a local injury, without calling upon the restorative powers of the constitution, would be equally in fault. They might each assist the other. We all know how much light has been thrown upon pathology by the cultivation of morbid anatomy ; how completely chirurgery has vindicated herself from the reproach, which her old name implies, of being a mere manual employment, by borrowing from theoretical medicine, or, as it is now termed, physiology. Here is a fair exchange. The sources of liberal knowledge should be free, that all may partake. But what should we say of a surgeon, who, having decked his own art with the fairest spoils of another, should affect to forget the obligation ? That he was ungrateful—or had an unhappy memory !

In a field of exertion so extensive, and so

varied, as that occupied by medicine, it is fitting therefore that labourers be admitted from all quarters; and that all persons be allowed to take such positions as their talents, inclinations, circumstances, or necessities may direct. The general good is best promoted when each man pleases himself, and goes to work *con amore*. A narrow and exclusive system would be ridiculous, when all the world knows that, at times, the most useful light has accidentally broken in upon us from regions which appeared out of the way; and that assistance has been given, unintentionally, by the natural enemies to the liberal sciences.

To allow that the subdivision of labour may possibly be carried too far, and that a fixed standard for the due management of the profession cannot be ascertained, is only granting that it partakes of the loose and undetermined nature of most sublunary affairs. In matters equally important, habit alone or long usage prescribes the rule. But, although our notions upon this subject continue indefinite, yet we should all be sensible of any wide departure from a just medium. Were we to hear it proposed to employ

a different doctor for the exclusive treatment of each symptom, we should feel the departure from propriety as great, as if a man, having experienced the want of a new instrument, should serve an apprenticeship at the anvil, that he might forge it with his own hands; and so incorporate this craft with his other manifold accomplishments.

We should not forget to notice certain minor branches of the healing art, which custom has generally kept in the hands of persons not regularly educated as medical men; who, nevertheless, by continual practice, acquire a dexterity and *tact* not to be despised. We mean dentists, cuppers, electricians, &c. The only principle upon which we are disposed to quarrel with such men, and many others, is this—that they usually begin at the wrong end, and proceed at once to practise, without previously attending to the elements and general laws of science. But when they submit to these rules, and fall in with the common discipline, it may be allowed that many of these artists serve as useful auxiliaries to the leading practitioner.

There are two things which have been alluded

to as of great importance, at present, to the art of healing; and as the most likely to contribute to its farther advancement. These are—the liberal spirit of enquiry every where shown: and the candid and unreserved communication of intelligence, for which (we may say, without suspicion of partiality,) the legitimate members of the medical profession are universally distinguished. In reverting to these circumstances, be it declared, so highly do we value experiment as a source of knowledge, that we would gladly assist in removing the stain which has attached itself to the empirical practice of medicine; provided the veil of mystery were for ever withdrawn from such transactions, and all concealment and bad faith relinquished for the future. We had rather the widest range were allowed, and Fortune and Chance occasionally invoked, than that too much restriction should be employed. But, at the same time, we should all understand the difference between rational experiment and hap-hazard. Science, even when unable to discover truth, is often of the highest utility in narrowing the field of enquiry. Reason is a mighty puller down of wrong systems; and,

though frequently at a loss to determine what is proper to be done, is generally acquainted with what has already been tried, and can say what need not be attempted. And in this way, both time and trouble are spared. It is surely claiming very little, for a man of science to insist, that he is the best person to institute a series of experiments ; and the most likely to profit by them.

And if we have defended the application of scientific principles, for the purpose of paving the way for experiment ; we are equally ready to show that they are of the greatest utility in certain cases, where they are not unfrequently supposed to be entirely relinquished. Nothing of late has so much distinguished the improved practice of medicine, as the frequent appeals to nature in the cure of complaints ; and it may seem an obvious inference, that medical men had been gradually driven from some of their former positions, and intended soon to give up all contest with disease. But it is an erroneous opinion. This system of neutrality, (which, if admissible, would wonderfully simplify the art of healing,) like all other sweeping plans, can-

not always be relied on. For although a person may not choose to interfere in trifling cases ; or may think proper to suspend his efforts during a period of convalescence ; yet what would be the consequence of his so doing in any sudden inflammation of a vital organ, a great loss of blood, or a fracture ? We know, to our sorrow, that impaired function, deformity, and death, are all within the pale of *natural* events. As there is a sustaining power of life and healthy action, there is also one of an opposite tendency to be occasionally counteracted. And it is in carefully watching the struggle between these two ; in judiciously interposing aid, when the vital principle is in danger of being overmatched, that the skill of the practitioner is shown. There may frequently be a difficulty in determining the proper medium between inertness and an officious meddling ; but the maxim, "*laissez faire*," would be a dangerous one to trust to, in cases where health and life were at stake.

It is true, the various circumstances which modify existence, are not subjects of rigid calculation ; yet our acquaintance with those leading facts that are commonly observed in similar

cases, (which we should call a knowledge of the laws of pathology,) and long practice, beget a habit of nicely weighing contingencies, and reckoning the probable course of future events: and it is this kind of foresight that constitutes the superiority of an educated man over an ignorant novice. We see the propriety of a partial interference with the order of nature, well illustrated by referring to the art of agriculture, where the preparation of the soil, and other cares of husbandry, are of use to a certain extent; but next follow the mysteries of vegetation, which are beyond all scrutiny, and but little submitted to the controul of human agency. How wide then is the difference between trusting to nature in matters where we have no power; and the total neglect of art!

But in exact proportion to our esteem for candour and liberality, is our abhorrence of selfishness and fraud.* These are not necessary

* An amusing sketch of a famous quack in the reign of queen Anne, is given in "Swift's Journal to Stella"

"Henley would fain engage me to go with Steele, Rowe, &c. to an invitation at Sir William Read's. Surely you have heard of him. He has been a mountebank, and is the queen's

concomitants of the profession ; but continually obstruct its views and impede its progress.

At this place, it would be difficult to avoid a farther allusion to the present state of medicine ; and, without any leaning to optimism, we may pronounce it to be, upon the whole, a good one. The gates of the temple of science are now thrown open ; and perpetual war declared against ignorance and error ; while the forms and technicalities of the art of healing, are of not more difficult attainment than the rudiments of many common handicrafts. And, really, as to the proverbial reproach of uncertainty, it should be recollected, that, however great this may be in degree, it is not different in kind from what occurs in most of the useful arts. As, for ex-

oculist. He makes admirable punch ; and treats you in gold vessels. But I am engaged, and won't go ; neither indeed am I fond of the jaunt." To this the following note is appended :

" He, (Sir William Read,) lived in Durham Yard. His advertisements in the Tatler (which displayed his astonishing abilities in the cure of every disorder of the eye, in removing wens and hare-lips, and in the curing of wry necks,) concluded by a notice, ' that he allowed nobody to practise in his name, but his lady, whom he had instructed ! ' "

ample, in politics, navigation, and commerce. Into all of these there enters a portion of fixed knowledge; they are all partly illustrated by the exact sciences; but after all, much is left to the judgment, which is fallible, and to experiment, which is, *a priori*, always doubtful. It has been the fortune of medicine, more than of any other art perhaps, to suffer from the exceptions which occasionally happen to all general maxims and rules of conduct. But, for one case where the doctors are at fault, there are probably a thousand which display the expected series of symptoms, from the incipient to the *ultimate*; and prove, (often alas too truly!) the accuracy of scientific observation. And as to those natural barriers which we find placed to our most earnest endeavour, those limits to our closest investigation;—of what service is reproach? That the springs of life and death, of health and of disease, can neither be discovered, nor possessed by any class of mortals, is all that can ever be learned of the matter. Let us then conclude, in the words of one who, after expending his whole stock of raillery upon the undue pretensions of the art of healing, has said, “Il n’est

pas moins vrai qu'un bon médecin nous peut sauver la vie en cent occasions, et nous rendre l'usage de nos membres. Un homme tombe en apoplexie ; ce ne sera ni un capitaine d'infanterie, ni un conseiller de la cour des aides qui le guérira. Des cataractes se forment dans mes yeux ; ma voisine ne me les lèvera pas."

But returning from this digression, we will recapitulate our reasons for thinking that all the various branches of the profession of medicine, should not be practised by one and the same person.

1. Because the pursuit of the medical sciences requires a great share of close and abstracted attention.

2. Because art of all kinds is a thing of an engrossing nature ; and, therefore, much time and practice are necessary for gaining skill and experience in any one of the many occupations, which make up the whole art of healing.

3. Because, from the great difference which is found to exist in the talents and capacities of men, all are not equally fitted for the same duties.

And lastly, we may add, that there is no ne-

cessity for altering the existing state of things. There is nothing compulsory or artificial in what we have defended ; and, therefore, it would be flying in the face of nature and of reason to attempt a revolution. Nevertheless, if after all it can be shown that a mere *lady-like* acquaintance with the sciences connected with the healing art is sufficient ; and if the many conflicting facts, which continually puzzle simple people, shall, at any time, be all reconciled by some safe and lucid system ; then we, as well as others, will be gainers by the change. Medicine will no longer be, what some have thought it, an arduous profession ; and a world of doubt, and of anxiety, and of responsibility, will be for ever removed from many feeling minds.

But, even now, there is always a resource for a physician, who wishes to *generalize* his ideas. He can go to the back settlements of America. There he will find a state of society but little removed from the simplicity of the golden age, and manners undebased by refinement : there too, in addition to the full exercise of his profession in all its various branches, he may preside on the bench ; or he may become a colonel in

the army ; or he may keep a tavern ; or, perhaps, unite all these functions. But to a surgeon of like sentiments, although the same advantages are open to him, we despair of offering any consolation equivalent to the regret which he must continually feel, while calling to mind the division of labour that took place when the ancient College of Barber-Surgeons was dissolved !

Upon looking over his little work, the author has noticed in it some remarks so true, that they look like *truisms*. He will be well satisfied, however, if he has merely observed what would readily suggest itself to any person who considered the question ; and will shelter himself under the following quotation, that he has met with, from d'Alembert ; which, though not directly applicable to the subject of this essay, will serve to excuse the frequent appeals that he has made to the common-sense of his reader, and the importance which he has throughout attached to popular feeling.

“ Le vrai en métaphysique ressemble au vrai en matière de goût ; c’est un vrai dont tous les esprits ont le germe en eux-mêmes, auquel le plupart ne font point d’attention, mais qu’ils reconnoissent dès qu’on le leur montre. Il semble que tout ce qu’on apprend dans un bon livre de métaphysique ne soit qu’une espèce de réminiscence de ce que notre âme a déjà su ; l’obscurité, quand il-y-en-a, vient toujours de l’auteur, parce que la science qu’il se propose d’enseigner n’a point d’autre langue que la langue commune. Aussi peut on appliquer aux bons auteurs de métaphysique ce qu’on a dit des bons écrivains, qu’il-n’y-a personne qui, en les lisant, ne croit pouvoir en dire autant qu’eux.”

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