

**A CONCISE
HISTORY OF
MEDICINE, PP. 7-66**

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A Concise

History of Medicine

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HISTORY OF MEDICINE.

Within the past three centuries the average working life of English-speaking men has doubled. A few lived as long as now, and some strong or favored ones had efficient working powers as long; but the common life was worn out in what is now middle age. In Shapeseare's time the 50's were venerable: "Old John of Gaunt, time-honored Lancaster," was 58 when supposedly so addressed; and Admiral Coligny, murdered at 53, is described by his contemporary biographer as a very old man. Now, when we hear of a death in the 60's, we instinctively feel it an untimely cutting off, in what should be still fresh and vigorous age, and even at 80 it seems but just fair ripeness for the sickle. The three factors which have wrought this change are advanced physical comfort, medicine and its handmaid hygiene, and surgery. And in the mitigation of the frightful mass of

actual pain, of physical torment which has racked every age down to the present, and which has scarcely even been alleviated till the past century, medicine stands incomparably first.

Some good foundations have been laid, it is true, in the century previous, and men were at work in the true scientific spirit. Great masters had stimulated their successors to study in the essential preliminary subjects, the constitution and functions of the body. The mighty Boerhaave of Holland (1668-1738) had revolutionized clinical observation; Morgagni of Italy (1682-1771) had "introduced anatomical thinking into medicine" (Virchow), and had done something, the same service for pathology which Haller of Germany (1708-77) did a generation later for physiology; while John Hunter (1728-93) had not only introduced capital improvements into operative surgery, but had set the pace in research into anatomical and physiological problems. But the

influence of old theories, founded on guesses and imperfectly interpreted observation, still lay heavy on the body of practitioners. The chief general theories in the 18th century were those of William Cullen (1710-90) and his pupil and assistant, John Brown (1738-88), of the University of Edinburgh; the former—a great advance on the older theory of “humors,” and on the right track—made the nervous system the seat of diseases; the latter divided all diseases into two classes—the sthenic, resulting from over-excitation and treated by depletion, and the asthenic, resulting from under-excitation and treated by stimulation. On the Continent, Hahnemann (1755-1843), his great theory propounded at Leipsic (1796-1810), soon after took adverse ground in his “homeopathy—a very different thing from what later passed under the name, though the latter retained the underlying basis. Besides his “law of similars” which Hippocrates had formulated before him, he rejected theory utterly, declaring that

it was impossible to know anything about pathological changes out of sight; that we can only know symptoms, and if those are removed it indicates of necessity that the disease which produced them must be gone, also. He also alleged that the fact of a given dose causing certain symptoms in a healthy person was obvious proof that it must be too large for a sick one; further, that to possess healing power the dose must be too small for recognition by the senses or chemical analysis; and that trituration, or dilution and shaking of minute doses caused molecular changes which infinitely increased their power—"dynamization," he termed it. The exaggeration of symptoms and empirics was a reaction against the current reliance on unbased theories; the paradox of infinitesimal doses, against the monstrous boluses and draughts with which patients were often gravely injured; there was usefulness in both reactions, but he went so far as to

declare that a child could be cured while asleep by holding the pellets near it.

But the reign both of guesswork theorizing and of groping empirics, as exclusive methods, was coming to an end, and the first great blow was delivered in the first year of the century. France now came to the front where other countries had thronged. Bichat, a genius, who wore himself out at 31, as did Clifford at 34, published the year before his death (1801) a work on general anatomy, in which he remade the entire science by showing that the different organs have membranes and tissues in common, and, therefore, that the seat of disease was in the constituent tissues and not in the organs as such. This not only simplified anatomy and physiology in much the same way that the alphabet simplified hieroglyphics, but threw the investigation of pathological changes into an entirely new channel. Parallel with this work, the followers in the footsteps of