

THE LATEST SYSTEMS IN MEDICINE

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649227280

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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1887

THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS.

SOME OF THE LATEST SYSTEMS IN MEDICINE.*

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The history of a science is a history of the human mind in its progress along a certain line. It shows by what stumbling steps, by what gropings through fogs of error, advance has been made. Medicine, like other branches of human knowledge, illustrates this. It has undergone evolution; the process is still going on—therefore it is not yet perfect. In its past, then, there has been much of error, and in its present there is much to be desired. Yet neither as to past or present has medicine anything to fear from comparison with other professions. A perfect form of government has not yet been devised. As bitter things have been said of the law, its delays and uncertainties, as of medicine, while its volumes upon volumes of conflicting and overruling decisions bear witness to its imperfections. Religious wars and religious persecutions furnish some of the darkest pages of human history, while the numerous spires of every city and village attest the diversity of interpretation of the revealed Word.

To-day I ask your attention to some points in the preceding stages of the progress of medicine, which present much of interest and of profit, and a study of which is essential to a comprehension of the medicine of to-day.

*The period of time passed over in this sketch, and the number of points touched upon, render it impossible to give references in every instance. The facts have been derived from the following works:

- RENOUARD; History of Medicine; translated by COMEGYS.
- SERENDEL; Geschichte der Arzneikunde.
- HECKER; Geschichte der neueren Heilkunde.
- FONSSAGRIVES; Principes de Therapeutique General; Introduction; Deuxieme Ed.
- TROUSSEAU ET PIDOUX; Traite de Therapeutique, etc.; Introduction; Huitieme ed.
- BOUCHUT; Histoire de la Medicine et des Doctrines Medicales.
- CANABIS; Revolutions de la Medicine.
- BAUER; Geschichte der Aderlasse.

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One fact in the history of medicine stands prominent—it has always taken on the character of the age. In ancient times, and indeed down to a comparatively recent period, it was made a part of philosophy, and the history of one was the history of the other. Forced, then, to take its place in a rigid framework of doctrines, which included the mental, moral and physical world, and explained the economy of the universe, it had no independent existence, and moved but as a puppet. Again, it has always varied with the changes which its allied sciences have undergone. Thus, when chemistry was making brilliant discoveries, pathology and therapeutics became largely chemical; when physics was making rapid progress, vital actions, normal and abnormal, took on a mechanical aspect; under the influence of the discoveries of Newton, and the doctrines of Des Cartes, an attempt was made to give them even a mathematical character.

Medicine to-day takes on the character of the age. It is active, enterprising, practical and scientific. It is scientific, so far as our knowledge permits; in spirit, it is entirely so, for it uses instruments of precision as far as possible, and much more than ever before. It accepts no statements that are not sustained by experiment or confirmed by numerous observers. Like the age, it is advancing, and more rapidly than ever before in its history. He would have been a bold man, who had stood up at our last meeting and proclaimed that the days of ether and chloroform for eye surgery had passed away. The brilliant discovery of the past year is but one example of the progress our art is making.

With these positive features of the medicine of to-day, allow me to contrast one negative. It is, the absence of any general theory of disease, or of the action of remedies. In no other point is there greater contrast between the medicine of the past and of the present than in this. We have no "system" of medicine. Upon this point the public is sadly ignorant. We are called "allopaths" by those who do not know what the term implies, and by those whose interest it is to make us out as narrow as themselves. The truth is, in the treatment of disease we are guided by the teachings of experience—not by theory.

What is a "system" in medicine? A set of hypothetical explanations of the nature and processes of disease,

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upon which are based dogmatic rules for the administration of remedies. A system differs from a theory or hypothesis in this, that the temporary and provisional use of these is recognized, while the doctrines of the other are accepted as final. Theory and hypothesis are the steps by which scientific men reach knowledge; the dogmas of a system are held by its disciples to be ultimate truth. When theories no longer agree with facts, they are abandoned; if facts do not agree with a system, so much the worse for the facts. Theories and hypotheses are the servants of the human mind; a system is its master.

The past of medicine is full of systems. They have been the curse of the profession, if not of the human race. They have led to such exaggerations of the value of some remedies, and such excesses in certain lines of treatment, as to give foundation for some of the bitterest sarcasms which have been directed against our art. Under some systems, the treatment of disease was but pure expectancy, then medicine at the bed-side was justly termed, "a meditation upon death," and the biting sarcasm of Goethe's Mephistopheles was fully justified.* Under others, excessive activity with powerful remedies was the rule; then the physician was likened to a blind man striking with a club, sometimes hitting the disease, oftener the patient. In the history of medical systems you will find that the Dr. Sangrado, of Le Sage, was not a mere creature of the imagination, and that the characters of Moliere were actors on the stage of real life.

It is to some of these systems that I would direct your attention to-day. The latest that figured in the history of medicine are four. They are the systems of John Brown, of Brössais, of Rasori, and of Hahnemann. What were the doctrines of these systems? What influence did they exert upon medical progress? What impression did they make on therapeutics? What remains of them now?

In regard to all these systems the following general statements may be made: 1. They had their origin in the unsatisfactory and imperfect state of medicine at the time. 2. Each of them contained doctrines as erroneous and exaggerations as great as any existing in the prevailing

*"Der Geist der Medicin ist leicht zu fassen;
Der durchschülert die grosse und kleine Welt,
Um es am Ende geh'n zu lassen,
Wie's Gott gefalt."

practice. 3. Each contained a measure of truth, small though it may have been, and this has passed into the general domain of medicine, while the residue has passed, or is passing, to oblivion. 4. Neither of them gained more than a small fraction of the profession as disciples, but these waged bitter warfare against the general body and its doctrines.

Let us go back one hundred years. Within thirty or forty years of that time these systems had their rise. Cullen published his "Elements" in 1789, which for nearly fifty years was the text-book of the civilized world. It was the first effort to place the practice of medicine on a scientific basis. Cullen stands at the dividing line between ancient and modern medicine. Haller's then recent discovery of irritability and contractibility as inherent properties of muscular fibre and of the sensibility of nerves, separates these two periods as by a great gulf. The solids could now play their part in physiology and pathology. Humoral pathology was overthrown after an unbroken reign of nearly eighteen centuries, and therapeutics became something more than an attempt to correct the acridity or viscosity of the fluids.

Cullen had something of a system based on spasm and atony of the capillaries, but at the bed-side he was a true clinician, and his system never governed him; for, although the father of solidism, he did not deny to the fluids a share in pathology, nor did he base his therapeutics entirely on theory.

Within about thirty or forty years of Cullen's appearance, the four systems alluded to took their rise. It was a notable period in human history. Politically, largely under the influence of our revolution and the establishment of our republic, France threw off her monarchical form of government, feudalism and the throne went down together, the foundations of social life were broken up, anarchy prevailed, until order was restored by a military despotism. Throughout Europe governments tottered, while up to 1815 successive waves of war swept from one end of the continent to the other. Notwithstanding the clash of arms it was a period of great intellectual activity. The sciences had made and were making rapid progress; the ideas of the past were unsettled without establishing new ones on a solid foundation. Electricity was a new wonder, and

seemed about to reveal all the secrets of vitality, normal and abnormal, and to furnish a universal remedy. Phrenology made its appearance and rapidly took a position from which it has ever since steadily declined. Mesmer came upon the scene with the first revelations of animal magnetism, now known as artificial somnambulism, farther to astonish and bewilder mankind. Never in the history of the world has there been a period when opinions were more unsettled and when inquiry was more restless. Speculation was the leading tendency of the times, a belief in the wonderful everywhere prevalent, while Germany was especially befogged by complicated and intricate systems of philosophy. These were fit times for the birth of systems of medicine, for medicine like other branches of knowledge was in a transition stage; the doctrines of the past were shaken and undermined, new ones had not yet been established. Taking the best possible view, medicine was in a deplorable condition; it was a mixture of dogmatism, of empiricism, and of mysticism. Cullen's influence had not yet, in the early part of the period, destroyed the influence of the humoral pathology, and based upon this, blood-letting was carried to excess. The *materia medica* was scanty, and the powers of medicine but imperfectly known. Moreover, a barbarous polypharmacy prevailed, and medicines were administered in complex and incongruous mixtures, as if by the number of ingredients to make up for want of precision of knowledge.

It would be unjust, however, not to mention the substantial advances made during this period, or to omit the names of those honest workers in our profession who at once added to knowledge and benefited the human race. Just before the opening of this period, Morgagni laid the foundations of pathological anatomy, John Hunter made his brilliant discoveries in physiology and surgery, and William Hunter his researches in obstetrics. Priestly discovered oxygen in 1774, and soon after Lavoisier made out the chemistry of combustion and respiration. Pneumatic chemistry had made great advances, and at the beginning of the century, Sir Humphrey Davy, in one short sentence on nitrous oxide, gave the first index to the road which led, nearly fifty years later, to the discovery of anesthetics. Bell, in 1794, delivered those lectures on surgery which inspired Ephraim McDowell to perform

ovariotomy — the most glorious triumph of surgery. Bichat, by his study of the tissues founded general anatomy. Jenner, in this period, discovered vaccination, never surpassed in practical benefit to mankind. Towards the close of it, Bright, in England, opened up a new and most important chapter in renal pathology, and in France, Laennec perfected the stethoscope, and by comparison of the physical signs during life, with the changes found after death, made an advance in practical medicine of inestimable value. These were some of the substantial gains of medicine during the time in which these systems rose and flourished. While they made progress along a very narrow line, the general profession was advancing with a broad front.

John Brown was a Scotchman of humble parentage. His early life was a struggle with poverty. Much of his education was gained by teaching and by translating into Latin, or by writing, the theses of other students. For a time he was a teacher, and became a tutor in Cullen's family, but they quarreled, and this had, without a doubt its influence in the origin of a system which was in opposition to the leading spirit of the times. He was a man of great ability and good classical education, endowed with an excellent memory, and great powers of language. A wit, a brilliant conversationalist, an eloquent and ready speaker, with a love of controversy that left no opportunity for the exercise of his powers unimproved, he attacked the views of his adversaries with the keenest sarcasm, and maintained his own opinions with that dogmatism which always wins the assent of the young and unthinking. Moreover, he was a convivialist, with the usual results; dissipation marred his prospects, prevented his success, and doubtless shortened his life.

Brown published his system in 1780. He opens in the usual strain of reformers. He had passed, he says, seventy years in lamenting the profound uncertainty and the impenetrable obscurities of a salutary art. All at once a revolution came to him. It was the result of a fit of gout. Previously he had treated himself in orthodox fashion with debilitating remedies and strict diet. This time he tried the opposite plan. He feasted, he drank to merriment, and his gout rapidly disappeared. "I saw by that," he says, "that there was an asthenic inflamma-

tion." This was an unrecognized fact then, familiar enough now. One fact would seem a narrow foundation upon which to build a system of medicine; yet Brown's system was thus built, as others have been. It was built in the cabinet, out of the imagination, not from facts gathered at the bed-side and observations made in the dead-house.

This is his system. Life is the result of incitability. All its expressions and phenomena are the result of the action of stimuli or excitants upon this incitability. It would seem, then, very important to know what incitability is. It is a word. As a thing it is unknown in nature; revealed only by its effects. Brown nowhere defines it, but says that every being is endowed with a certain amount of it which being exhausted, life ceases. It pervades the entire system, it varies in degree, but never differs in quality. Diseases are changes in this incitability, either of excess or deficiency, caused by the influence of external or internal stimuli. A lessened incitability is debility, and this may be either the effect of too little incitation, or the result of over-stimulation. Diseases from increased incitability are sthenic, from decreased, asthenic. But there was a wonderful disproportion between these two classes, 97 per cent. were asthenic, 3 per cent. sthenic. The location of different diseases in these two classes was entirely arbitrary; some very dissimilar in nature and in symptoms, were ranged side by side. A scale was formed, which read upwards toward increased, and downwards toward decreased incitability, and the word of the master gave each disease its position.

In this system, local diseases received scant attention, everything depended on the condition of the whole economy. As for etiology, students were warned against the study of the causes of disease, that "venomous serpent of philosophy." A knowledge of anatomy was of slight value. Any idea of specific diseases, or of remedies acting specifically, either against disease, or on particular organs, was entirely lacking. The symptoms of the patient, even, were of little account, all depended alone on an estimate of the powers of the general system.

Brown's therapeutics was the corollary of his pathological doctrines. For sthenic diseases, he used depletion and evacuations. But we have seen how small proportion of dis-