MEDICINE OF THE FUTURE; AN ADDRESS PREPARED FOR THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE BRITISH MEDICAL ASSOCIATION IN 1886

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BY
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The late DR. AUSTIN FLINT *was appointed to read the address on Medicine before the British Medical Association at its meeting in 1886. The manuscript was found among his papers and the address is printed precisely as it was written. The proof was reverently read by his son, who dedicates this, his father's last literary work, to the profession he so loved and adorned.*

AUSTIN FLINT.

April 24, 1886.

MEDICINE OF THE FUTURE.

THE meditations of a medical practitioner whose retrospections extend over half a century may naturally be expected to revert to the past. To review the progress of medicine for fifty years, to make comparisons of the beginning and the end of that period, to revive the enthusiasm of by-gone days—these are among the resources of those who may be called medical semi-centenarians. In the ability to look backward through so long a period, is to be found some compensation for deprivations incident to the passage of one's life beyond youth and middle age. Retrospection has uses apart from this compensatory gratification; but, if too absorbing, it impairs appreciation of the present and faith in the future. To look forward, as well as backward, is both interesting and useful. If our retrospections extend over half a century, it is worth while to inquire, How will the present appear in a retrospective view at the end of the next

fifty years? In the spirit of this inquiry, I shall submit some thoughts on medicine of the future.

I assume that medicine, as it is to-day, will not remain stationary. In everything relating to human knowledge, anticipations have no basis other than experience. The past history of medicine shows a law of progress; hence, medicine will continue to advance. I shall view this conclusion, however, from another and a higher standpoint. If we believe in an overruling Creator and Governor of the universe, everything, however great or however small, must be in accordance with a divinely ordered plan. Diseases doubtless have their uses, some of which are apparent to human comprehension. The prevention and the successful management of diseases also enter into providential design. The past gives an assurance of progressively increasing security of human life from diseases. The progress of medicine belongs, therefore, in the order of Providence.

Past experience shows that medicine advances by means of discoveries and improvements which mark epochs in its history. Immediately preceding the beginning of the last half-century, following the discovery of vaccination, by Jenner, and the developments in anatomy, physiology, and pathology, by the researches of John Hunter, were the

discovery of auscultation by Laennec, the inauguration of renal pathology by Richard Bright, the creation of general anatomy by Bichat, and the advancement in knowledge of the nervous system by the experiments of Magendie and Charles Bell. These were epochs occurring in quick succession. The epochs within the last half-century have been as many, as important, and as rapid as during the previous fifty years. They whose retrospections embrace this period of time can recall the discovery of the reflex system of nerves, and of the separate functions of different portions of the spinal cord; the study of diseases after the numerical method; the recognition of the self-limitation of certain diseases and knowledge of their natural history; the creation of histology, by means of the microscope; the localization of certain of the cerebral functions; the employment of anæsthetics and their applications in medicine as well as in surgery and obstetrics; the clinical introduction of the ophthalmoscope and the laryngoscope; the clinical use of the thermometer; and, as a crowning epoch, the more recent revelations respecting the bacterial origin of diseases. Now, suppose that whoever may be honored by an invitation to read an address on medicine at the annual meeting of the British Medical Association in the year 1936 should select

as his theme the history of medicine for the preceding half-century, is it to be doubted that the epochs belonging to this history will be found to be not less in number and in importance than those which signalized medical progress during the first half of the century ending at that date? Does not the history of medicine show a steady acceleration in progress, so that, judging by the past, these next fifty years will be richer in epochs than the previous half-century? *

Has our knowledge of the organs, tissues, and chemical constituents of the body reached its limitations? About half a century ago, Horner, of Philadelphia, described a lachrymal muscle, which bears his name, measuring three lines in breadth and six lines in length. At that time this little muscle seemed the only thing left for discovery in macroscopical anatomy. But soon afterward, a new continent in this department of medicine was discovered, and the question now is, How much further can future exploration in microscopical

* Sir James Paget, in his inaugural address at the opening of the International Medical Congress in 1881, expressed his belief that the progress of science "in the last fifty years was twice as great as that in the previous fifty," and that "the rate of progress should constantly increase." If the latter belief be in accordance with the order of Providence, how interesting will be the retrospections of half a century in 1936!

anatomy be extended? To particularize the epochs to take place in the future would be equivalent to making them; but conjecture respecting the means by which they are to be made is admissible. It is probable that the construction of the microscope admits of continued improvements. The illumination of microscopical objects may be increased. The practical applications of the spectroscope may be enlarged. The developments in optics may furnish new methods of observation. The process of staining, which has recently done so much for pathology, may be extended and applied to the study of the normal as well as morbid components of the body. It is a fact, significant as regards the future, that the use of dyes has brought into the range of vision objects which, without their use, the microscope fails to make visible.

Analytical chemistry carries investigation beyond the limits of microscopical observation. The latter, at the present moment, both in pathology and physiology, seems to promise most; but is it not a rational anticipation to look for future results from chemical analysis of the components of the body, in health and disease, which in brilliancy and practical utility may surpass those of the labors in this field of investigation during the past half-century? The medical semi-centenarian can recall