

**THE MEDICAL PROFESSION AND  
SOCIETY: THE ANNUAL  
DISCOURSE BEFORE THE  
MASSACHUSETTS MEDICAL  
SOCIETY, MAY 30, 1866**

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The Medical Profession and Society: The Annual Discourse Before the Massachusetts Medical society, may 30, 1866 by George C. Shattuck

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**GEORGE C. SHATTUCK**

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BEFORE THE

MASSACHUSETTS MEDICAL SOCIETY,

MAY 30, 1866.

BY GEORGE C. SHATTUCK, M.D.

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BOSTON :

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THE  
MEDICAL PROFESSION AND SOCIETY.

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MR. PRESIDENT, AND FELLOWS  
OF THE MASSACHUSETTS MEDICAL SOCIETY:

WE meet, on this our anniversary, to hold counsel on matters of interest and great importance, not to ourselves only, by any means, but to all members of the community. Accidental violence, sickness, death, are impending over all; no one knows how soon or how suddenly he may be overtaken by them. The strongest may not wisely glory in his strength and despise means and appliances of support, relief or cure. The agents of disease, decay and death beset the path of all in every period of existence. The fetus in the womb, and the old man in his last struggle to maintain existence, are alike the subjects of our care. Strong and weak, rich and poor, high and low, have a concern in our doings and sayings

as we meet here to-day, in the furtherance of the interests of the science and the art intrusted to our charge. Our responsibilities are great, and each one of us in his solitary round, as well as at these times of reunion for counsel and refreshment, must realize more or less vividly the arduousness and difficulties of his calling, as well as his need of support and encouragement.

We have this year appropriated more time to the objects which bring us together. Scientific papers and communications are encouraged by an assurance that they will not be crowded out by matters of business and routine. There is no longer one address or one speaker, in which and by whom such subjects are presented. Hours have been assigned for written communications on matters pertaining to our science and our art, and hence your attention may now with propriety be invited to some thoughts on our professional duties and relations, the subject of the annual address nineteen years ago, by one beloved and esteemed in his day, whom the present speaker must be content to follow here as elsewhere, at an humble distance.

One of our trials is that of intercourse with many who, from ignorance or wilfulness, despise our profession and treat it with disrespect and insult. We are living in an age and a community where authority is misunderstood and set at naught, where the individual feels himself called upon to treat lightly the conclusions and experience of the past, and to investigate and decide anew on most important questions and interests. Why should there be pro-



fessions and societies to trammel and fetter the individual, to rob him of his liberty, and to clog and impede his efforts and aspirations? We have amongst us a sect of eclectics who are banded together to resist the profession of medicine with its colleges and societies, and to claim for each individual the right to follow his own fancies and notions, untrammelled by a regard to the rights, feelings, or interests of any associates. Our profession has existed for two thousand years, and each age has borne testimony to its efficaciousness and its value; but all this is of no account with those who prefer medical practitioners for the very reason that they do not belong to a profession. We have others among us who claim that in all this time, from absurd prejudice, the female sex has been deprived of a just right to support themselves and their husbands and children by the exercise of the art of healing. The community has been called upon to furnish means for the erection of medical colleges and hospitals, that the science and practice of medicine may be taught to women.

It is urged upon medical societies to admit amongst their members the graduates of these institutions, and complaint is made to the State legislature that the diplomas of these colleges do not command proper respect and consideration, and that male and female practitioners are not regarded nor treated with equal respect or confidence. All facilities must be granted to prove to the world that it has been all along doing great injustice to the female sex, with the idea that the organization of this sex, its physi-

cal, mental, and moral peculiarities, are not as well adapted to the acquisition of the science, and to the practice of the art of medicine, as are those of the other sex.

The fallacies that the great Creator has made all alike, and not each after its kind; that welfare and happiness are to result from the removal of all law and restraint, and every one being allowed to do what seemeth good in his own eyes; that the individual cannot trust in the solution of problems worked out in past ages, nor in any divine ordering of the world; and that his duty is to set about reforming and reconstructing every thing, are not to be reasoned out of people, inasmuch as their very entertainment must proceed from an original defect of reason and judgment. They may remind us of our own defects, of the saying, *humanum est errare*; they may stimulate us to self-examination, and to such amendment and improvement that a good cause shall not suffer from our weakness or negligence. The fact that there are those who have no confidence in our profession, who seek relief in pain and sickness from other sources, should lead us to ask how far we are to blame for all this, what are our shortcomings and faults, and how we are to amend them? Controversy for the most part is unprofitable and to be avoided, and if we take ourselves to task we may be let alone by others. And we have an additional motive for this, when we consider what a glorious heritage is ours. We belong to a body which for more than two thousand years has been doing a work of beneficence through earnest and diligent seeking of the

truth, which has existed in such various climes and countries, and has lived through the rise and fall of mighty empires and of powerful dynasties. We are associated with great and good men of all ages, whose writings are identified with the literature of the most polished languages, and their deeds with the histories of the mightiest nations. And whatever we may do in our short lives, will not die with us. We are indeed the children of a day; as individuals our strength is uncertain, so disproportionate to the work, yet each of us may do something towards increasing the store of knowledge, to be used by those who come after him. Each one may sow seed, leaving the reaping for others, so that when the places in which he has labored and with which he has been identified, shall know him no more forever, the world may be the better for his having lived in it, and succeeding generations wiser and happier for contributions, however small, preserved in the archives of the profession which lives and flourishes, whilst its individual members die and disappear. Can we not then spend our hours profitably in looking at and considering some of the objects and advantages, some of the privileges and duties pertaining to each of us as members of the medical profession and the medical society. There is, it is true, nothing new to be said on this subject, but old truths may be revived and dwelt upon, and we may inquire of the days that are past, and we may consider the sayings and doings of our fathers in such a way as to take hold of our own work more understandingly and to prosecute it more vigorously.