

**THE SOUTHERN PRACTITIONER: AN
INDEPENDENT MONTHLY
JOURNAL; DEVOTED TO MEDICINE
AND SURGERY, VOL. 9, OCTOBER,
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THE INAUGURAL ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT OF
THE INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL CONGRESS.*

NATHAN SMITH DAVIS, M. D., LL. D., OF CHICAGO.

GENTLEMEN: It is my duty to remind you that if there were one to whom more than another we are indebted for having the Ninth International Medical Congress in America, one who was well known for his contributions to medical literature, who was universally regretted as the most national leader in literary work, and had been selected to preside over your deliberations on this occasion, it was the late Dr. Austin Flint, of New York. He was taken from his earthly labors early in 1886, before the work of this Congress had been half completed. His ability and the number and character of his contributions to medical literature, had caused him to be known and esteemed in the profession in all countries, and his loss seems now, as it did immediately after his death, well nigh irreparable. But though he has taken his

*Delivered on Monday, September 5, 1887, at the Opening Session of the Congress, in Washington.

departure the influence of his excellent example and his scientific work remains, and will continue to exert a beneficial influence over generations to come. Leaving this sad part of my task with a heart overflowing with gratitude to him and a sense of my own deficiencies, I thank you for the honor you have bestowed in selecting me to preside over the deliberations of this great and learned assembly. It is an honor that I appreciate as second to no other of a temporal nature, because it has been bestowed neither by conquest nor hereditary influence, nor yet by partisan strife, but by the free expression of your own choice.

Addressing myself now more directly to those here assembled, who have left homes and loved ones in other lands, and encountered the fatigue and danger of traveling by sea and by land, in the name of the Medical profession of this country, I welcome you, not only to this beautiful city and the hospitality of its citizens, as has been so admirably done already by the honorable representative of the Government, who has just taken his seat, but I cordially welcome you to the open arms and warm hearts of the medical men of this *whole country*, in whose name you were invited here three years since, and whose representatives are now here, side by side with you, gathered from the East, the West, the North, the South, as well as from the rugged mountains and fertile valleys of the Center, to make good the promise implied by that invitation.

If they do not cause you to feel at home and happy, not only in the social circles and halls devoted to the advancement of science, literature, and art in this city of our nation's pride, but wherever you may choose to roam, from the rocky coast of New England on the Atlantic, to the Golden Gate of the Pacific, it will be from no want of earnest disposition to do so.

And now I not only thus welcome you from other lands, but I take great pleasure in greeting you one and all, as leading representatives of a profession whose paramount object is the lessening of human suffering by preventing, alleviating, or curing diseases wherever found, and in whatever class or grade of the human family. Nay, more—With profound reverence I greet you as a noble brotherhood, who, in the practical pursuit of that one grand

object, recognize no distinction of country, race, or creed, but bind up the wounds and assuage the pains of the rich and poor, ruler and ruled, Christian and pagan, friend and foe alike.

Not that every medical man does not love and defend his own country and fireside with as fervid a patriotism as the members of any other class of men, but as disease and pain are limited to no class or country, so is the application of his beneficent art limited only by the number of those suffering within his reach.

With a common object so beneficent in its nature, and opportunities for its practical pursuit so universal, it is but natural that you should be found searching for the most effectual means for the accomplishment of the one object of lessening human suffering in every field of nature, and in every department of human knowledge.

The living human body, the chief object of your solicitude, not only combines in itself the greatest number of elementary substances and the most numerous organs and varied functions, so attuned to harmonious action as to illustrate the operation of every law of physics, every known force in nature, and every step in the development of living matter, from the simple aggregation of protoplasm constituting the germinal cell to the full-grown man, but it is placed in appreciable and important relations with the material objects and immaterial forces existing in the world in which he lives.

Hence, a complete study of the living man, in health and disease, involves a thorough study, not only of his structure and functions, but more or less of every element and force entering into the earth, the air, and the water with which he stands in constant relation.

The medical science of to-day, therefore, embraces not only a knowledge of the living man, but also of such facts, principles, and materials gathered from every other department of human knowledge as may increase your resources for preventing or alleviating his suffering and of prolonging his life.

The time has been when medical studies embraced little else than the fanciful theories and arbitrary dogmas of a few leading minds, each of which became for a time the founder of a sect or

so-called school of medicine, with his disciples more or less numerous. But with the development of general and analytical chemistry, of the several departments of natural science, of a more practical knowledge of physics, and the adoption of inductive processes of reasoning, the age of theoretical dogmas and of medical sects blindly following some more plausible leader, passed away, leaving but an *infinitesimal* shadow yet visible on the medical horizon.

So true is this, that in casting our mental vision to-day over the broad domain of medicine, we see its votaries engaged, some searching for new facts and new materials; some studying new applications and better uses of facts and materials already known; some of them are in the dead-house with scalpel and microscope, not only studying the positions and relations of every part, from the obvious bones and muscles to the smallest leucocyte, in health, but, also every deviation caused by morbid action or disease. Some are searching the fields, the forests, the earth, and the air, both for more knowledge concerning the causes of disease and for additional remedial agents; some are in laboratories with crucible, test-glass, and microscope analyzing every morbid product and every remedial agent, separating the active principles from the crude materials and demonstrating their action on living animals, while far the greater number are at the bedside of the sick and wounded applying the knowledge gained by all other workers to the relief of human suffering. A more active, earnest, ceaseless, and beneficent field of labor is not open to your vision in any other direction or occupied by any other profession or class of men. And thus has the Science of Medicine become a vast aggregation of observed facts, many of them so related to each other as to permit practical deductions of permanent value, while many others remain isolated through incompleteness of investigations, and therefore liable to prompt, hasty, or even erroneous conclusions.

Indeed, the most defective and embarrassing feature in the Science and Art of Medicine at this time is the rapid accumulation of facts furnished by the vast number of individual workers, each pushing investigations in some special direction without con-

cert with his fellows and without any adequate conception of the coincident lines of observation necessary to enable him to see the true bearing of the facts he evolves. Hence he is constantly mistaking mere coincidences for the relation of cause and effect, and the pages of our medical literature are being filled with hastily formed conclusions and rules of practice from inadequate data.

This results, in part at least, from the extent and variety of the fields of inquiry and the complexity of the problems presented for solution. For nowhere else within the realms of human thought does the mind encounter problems requiring for their correct solution the consideration of a greater number of data than in the study of etiology and pathology. To determine the appreciable conditions of the earth, air, and water of any country before, during, and after the invasion of an epidemic disease long enough to include several consecutive visits of the same, is not possible for a single individual nor for any number of observers acting separately or without concert.

Yet just this complete knowledge is necessary, to enable us to separate the conditions that are merely coincident, or accidental, from those that are such constant accompaniments of the disease as to prove a necessary relation between them. And it is only by such persistent, co-incident, systematic observations of many individuals, each having a definite part, and the results carefully compared analytically and synthetically at proper intervals, that the real conditions and laws controlling the prevalence and severity of epidemics and endemics can be clearly demonstrated. It is not enough to discover the primary infection, or the *contagium vivum*, whether it be the bacillus of cholera, yellow fever, or tuberculosis; for abundant experience has shown that not one of these will extend its ravages in any community or country unless it finds there is a soil or pabulum congenial for its support and propagation.

It is on the development and diffusion of knowledge concerning the local conditions necessary for receiving and propagating the specific infections of disease that nearly all the important sanitary measures of modern times have been based. And it is

on a further development of knowledge in the same direction, gained by more systematic, continuous, and coincident investigation, that we shall most successfully protect our race from the pestilences that have hitherto "walked in darkness and wasted at noonday."

It was the extensive and ever-extending field of medical science, the complexity of the problems pressing for solution, and, still more, the individual responsibility of applying the resources at command to the direct treatment of disease, that early disposed medical men to seek each other's counsel, to form groups or clubs for comparison of views and mutual improvement. The manifest advantages of these soon prompted more extended social gatherings, until at the present time a large proportion of the more active members of the profession in every civilized country are participating in municipal, district, national, and international medical organizations.

The aggregate benefit derived from all this active intercourse is beyond easy expression in words. In the more frequent and familiar comparison of cases and views on all professional subjects in the local societies, closer habits of observation and a wider range of thought are induced, while narrow prejudices and bigotry give place to generous rivalry and personal friendships. In the larger gatherings the formal preparation of papers and reports on a great variety of subjects, impels their authors to a wider range of study and greater mental discipline, while the collision with other minds in discussion brings all aspects of the subject to view, enlarging the scope of mental vision, starting new trains of thought, and begetting a broader and stronger mental grasp with purer and nobler aims in life.

I think I am justified in saying that no other one influence operative in human society during the present century has done as much to develop and diffuse medical knowledge, to stimulate its practical and successful application, both in sanitary measures for preventing disease and in the direct alleviation of suffering at the bedside, and in unifying and ennobling the profession itself, as has been accomplished by the aggregate medical society organizations of the world. Yet their capacity for conferring other

and perhaps greater benefits, under proper management, will become manifest in the near future. And that I may accomplish the chief object of this address, I must ask your indulgence while I indicate some of the more important additional benefits in advancing medical science and saving human life through the instrumentality of our medical society organizations, and the methods by which they may be accomplished.

Every experienced and intelligent practitioner of the healing art is familiar with the fact that all acute general diseases are influenced in their prevalence and severity by seasons of the year, topographical and other conditions of the earth, meteorological conditions of the atmosphere, and the social condition and habits of the people themselves. The most familiar endemics vary annually in the same localities, while the great epidemics that have for ages broken over the comparatively limited boundaries of their habitats only at intervals of years, and extended their ravages from country to country and receded again to the source from which they apparently originated, differ widely in the different periods of their prevalence. But in studying the essential causes of any one of these general diseases and the laws and conditions under which such causes operate, he soon finds certain factors, essential for the solution of his problems, wanting.

For instance, if he wishes to identify the date of the first attack of epidemic cholera in a given locality, and the character of bowel affections immediately preceding, the ordinary statistics of mortality will give him only the date of death, which may have been from one to seven days later, or it may have been preceded by one or more cases that recovered. If he is anxious to determine the reason why the disease, on entering one community, develops with such rapidity that in a few days its victims are found in every grade of the population and in almost every street, while in another it develops slowly, adhering persistently to particular classes or localities, he may find in the ordinary meteorological records the thermometric, barometric, and hygrometric conditions of the atmosphere, with the direction and velocity of the winds, but he finds nothing regarding those important though variable elements known as ozone and hydrogen peroxide, active oxi