

**MEDICINE AND
PSYCHOLOGY: THE ANNUAL
ADDRESS TO THE HUNTERIAN
SOCIETY, FOR 1866**

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Medicine and Psychology: The Annual Address to the Hunterian Society, for 1866 by Dennis de Berdt Hovell

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DENNIS DE BERDT HOVELL

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MEDICINE AND PSYCHOLOGY:

THE ANNUAL ADDRESS TO
THE HUNTERIAN SOCIETY,
For 1866.

By DENNIS DE BERDT HOVELL,
FELLOW OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS, ENGLAND.

What employment will the Orator find in a world
where there is no wrong to be attacked, and no right to
be defended?



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MEDICINE AND PSYCHOLOGY.

IT has been said, that if any individual, however humble his pretensions, will carefully note down, at the time of their occurrence, such circumstances as come under his notice, he will by the fidelity of his work, apart from any quality of intrinsic value, contribute that which is useful to his fellow creatures; and it is only by thus endeavouring to turn to account some of the various facts that have from time to time presented themselves for observation in the course of my professional life, that I can hope to fulfil the task assigned to me of endeavouring to illustrate the principles and practice by which John Hunter contributed so much to the elevation of the profession, to the advance as well as the improvement of the healing art, in order that this annual occasion may be the means of stimulating each successive age to follow his example. And although it necessarily does not fall to the lot of all members of our or of any other profession to stand in the first

rank, every member is not the less called upon to fulfil to the best of his ability the duties of his particular province; so, equally, although the talent to discover brilliant facts and truths is beyond the scope of most of us, it still remains to every one to test the value of such discoveries by bringing their light to bear upon the cases that come before him, and thus, in the words of an old writer, though a man cannot invent anything new after so many, he may do a welcome work yet, and help posterity to judge rightly of the old.

To pronounce the impossibility of cure of certain diseases, says Lord Bacon, is to sanction by a law the ignorance or the remissness of the physician. Yet, however far off and impracticable the cure of all diseases must ever be, notwithstanding this bold assertion, the question will bear some analogy to calculations of the duration of human life, which, approaching to an actual certainty in the aggregate, are open to the greatest insecurity in the instance of each individual person; so, although a certain number of diseases will always remain incurable, we know not which of the most intractable may next be compelled to conform to the improvements of our art. Something may yet be found to influence favourably

the state of the blood in cancer, as well as improve the imperfect organization that results in tubercle.

Let it not be said that it is useless to fix so high and unattainable a standard, still less let it be treated with ridicule. Would any one think of rejecting the use of the mariner's compass because, although it possesses the marvellous power of constantly pointing to the North Pole, we cannot possibly reach that inaccessible spot; and, even if we could, its usefulness would perhaps be least shewn in conducting us thither? We know that the perfect needle ever maintains the true direction, and that the same quality imperfectly developed needs the assistance of certain electric currents passing constantly at right angles, to keep it steadfast. So may our professional aim be ever kept well directed by the right-minded currents of diligent labour and patient investigation; and if we can neither cure cancer nor modify its growth, we can at least relieve the pain by narcotics, and neutralize the stench by anti-septics.

It is not by any assumed novelty that I seek to engage your attention, but, in accordance with the principle quoted above, by endeavouring to trace through the practice of therapeutics some one principle of action that proves to be most extensively

efficient, which we adopt unintentionally, and find unexpectedly to be the cause of our greatest success: neither by seeking to invest an old principle with a new form; but simply by bringing under a stronger light that which is of every-day practice, to endeavour to extend the ground of a useful principle, one that from its very simplicity appears to have been sometimes partially lost sight of. In other words, not only are better results obtained by adhering to first principles, but where these are put aside for others that are considered improvements, the substance of good results is in danger of being missed for the shadow of loftier pretensions. It is better to confine ourselves to means within our reach, and endeavour to extend and improve them, than unsuccessfully to attempt to rise above the limits of our condition; preferable to earn our advance by the sweat of the face, than to tempt a fall by soaring on the wings of Icarus.

It is not intended to imply that the less perfect practice of our profession is otherwise than partial, but it may not be inexpedient to inquire how far it becomes affected by the tendency of collateral science. Isolation of any one mode of life is, in these times, as impracticable as it is inexpedient;

and we are apt to be influenced more or less by surrounding circumstances—the existing tendency of our thoughts, words, and deeds is to partake of the several qualities of many, and to lack the completeness and perfect finish of any one. The age of which it was foresaid that “many shall run to and fro and knowledge shall be increased,” cannot in some respects be very different from the present; but posterity will decide, better than ourselves, whether this period has been most influenced by the collective self-interest of the many or the presiding wisdom of the few. In an age so exacting in the calls upon the time of most of us, little opportunity is left for close study and individual research. The current ideas of the day are passed so rapidly from one to another, that sufficient time is hardly allowed for making a correct impression; in the hasty transition they are apt to lose their clearness of outline and characteristic definition, and thus eventually to represent something different from the original intention.

But if knowledge is to be increased, so also should it be amplified and extended, and still further usefully applied; and as the objects of travel, however bright and valuable they may be, are not of real