

**OLD AGE, AND CHANGES
INCIDENTAL TO IT: THE ANNUAL
ORATION DELIVERED BEFORE THE
MEDICAL SOCIETY OF LONDON,
MAY 4TH, 1885**

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Old Age, and Changes Incidental to it: The Annual Oration Delivered Before the Medical Society of London, May 4th, 1885 by George Murray Humphry

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GEORGE MURRAY HUMPHRY

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THE ANNUAL ORATION DELIVERED BEFORE
THE MEDICAL SOCIETY OF LONDON

May 4th, 1885

BY

GEORGE MURRAY HUMPHRY, M.D., F.R.S.

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Cambridge

MACMILLAN AND BOWES

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OLD AGE, AND CHANGES INCIDENTAL TO IT.



MR. PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN,

Old age acquires a gradually increasing interest as advancing civilisation enables a larger number of persons to attain to it, and affords them additional means of enjoying it and profiting by it. From the schoolboy-day, now full fifty years ago, when the *De Senectute* of the great Roman orator made a lasting impression upon me, the subject of old age has had some fascination for me, though multifarious avocations have prevented my giving much attention to it. In the past year, the Collective Investigation Committee of the British Medical Association, at my instance, commenced an inquiry respecting aged persons, and issued a form, with a memorandum, for

the purpose of collecting information of various kinds respecting the condition, habits, etc., past and present, of persons who had attained to advanced age. The minimum age for the subjects of inquiry was fixed at eighty. We are indebted to many members of the profession, and to some others, for the returns they have taken the trouble to make, which at the present exceed 500, the number of males and of females being nearly equal. These have been, in part, carefully tabulated and analysed by myself, with the aid of my friend and assistant, Mr. A. Francis. It is not to be supposed that from this, or other investigations of the like kind, any very novel results will be obtained; for the hill of knowledge is mounted with slow and laborious steps, and we must be content to advance little by little. I do not, however, propose to weary you with many of the details of this inquiry, which, I may observe, is not yet completed, but to make a few remarks upon the subject of old age, which will be, to some extent, based upon information derived from the inquiry just mentioned.

We are, I think, too much accustomed in our ideas to limit the work of development to the periods of adolescence and maturity; and, indeed, the surpassing wonders of that work—I say surpassing wonders, for, unquestionably, the processes of development of an animal body are the most marvellous, the most mysterious, and the most interesting in the whole range of the physical world—are most fully demonstrated in the early periods of life. But they do not end in them, or even when the body has been brought to its fully matured condition. They continue in a definite and orderly manner, though with lessened and lessening activity, to the termination of life, at whatever period that termination may occur. The march of changing events in the human body, from the age of 40 or 50 to 100, is as regular, as orderly, as developmental, though less quick, and therefore less apparent, as it is from birth to adolescence, or from conception to birth. It is one of the resultants of that inscrutable *vis*, call it what you will, and refer it to what you will, which makes all nature one, which determines