

**MEDICAL PROBLEMS OF THE  
DAY: THE ANNUAL DISCOURSE  
BEFORE THE MASSACHUSETTS  
MEDICAL SOCIETY, JUNE 3, 1874**

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Medical problems of the day: The Annual Discourse Before the Massachusetts Medical Society,  
June 3, 1874 by Nathan Allen

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**NATHAN ALLEN**

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BY  
NATHAN ALLEN, M.D., LL.D.,  
LOWELL, MASS.

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# THE MEDICAL PROBLEMS OF THE DAY.

BY NATHAN ALLEN, M.D.,  
OF LOWELL.

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Read at the Annual Meeting of the MASSACHUSETTS MEDICAL SOCIETY,  
June 3, 1874.\*

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

GENTLEMEN:

To be the mouth-piece of the largest and one of the oldest medical societies in this country is an honor and position of no ordinary character. In 1781, ninety-three years ago this very month, was organized the Massachusetts Medical Society. This occurred in the midst of the Revolutionary War, and its founders were among the leading surgeons in that war. The object of the Society, as specified in its charter and by-laws, was not only to foster and build up a skilful, learned and honorable profession, but to protect the community from imposition and quackery. Since its organization it has had enrolled in its fellowship over three

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\* At an Adjourned Meeting of the Mass. Medical Society, held Oct. 3, 1860, it was Resolved, "That the Massachusetts Medical Society hereby declares that it does not consider itself as having endorsed or censured the opinions in former published Annual Discourses, nor will it hold itself responsible for any opinions or sentiments advanced in any future similar discourses."

Resolved, "That the Committee on Publications be directed to print a statement to that effect at the commencement of each Annual Discourse which may hereafter be published."

thousand physicians, and has at the present time over thirteen hundred members. Its first President was the celebrated Dr. Edward A. Holyoke, and the first annual dissertation read before it was in 1784, by Dr. Isaac Rand. For over half a century an address has been given before the Society every year, except 1830 and 1831, when the appointees failed by reason of illness. To describe the usefulness of this organization, and its past and present influence in this commonwealth, would be no easy task.

One year ago I accepted with many misgivings a duty from its hands which I attempt this day to discharge, realizing in some measure, I trust, the importance of the occasion, and the favorable opportunity it affords to say something which may advance the interests of a noble profession. In entering upon this duty, I find the following sentiment of Lord Bacon most appropriate and expressive: "I hold," says he, "every man a debtor to his profession; from the which as men of course do seek to receive countenance and profit, so ought they of duty to endeavor themselves by way of amends to be a help and ornament thereunto. This is performed in some degree by the honest and liberal practice of a profession, where men shall carry a respect not to descend into any course that is corrupt and unworthy thereof, and preserve themselves from the abuses wherewith the same profession is noted to be infected; but much more is this performed, if a man be able to visit and

strengthen the roots and foundations of the science itself, thereby not only gracing it in reputation and dignity, but also amplifying it in profession and substance." The first sentiment expressed here, that is, an "honest and liberal practice of a profession," with honorable conduct and elevated motive, is far easier of attainment than that in the latter part of the quotation, viz., to "visit and strengthen the roots and foundations of the science itself."

This is not easy. The roots and foundations of medical science have their germs, their bases in the primary laws of nature. Her secrets must be carefully explored and closely scrutinized. Thus William Harvey, one of the most distinguished lights in medical history, in bequeathing a rich legacy to advance this science, exhorts his brethren above all things "to study and search out the secrets of nature by observation and experiment." Though we may be unable to follow in the footsteps of these illustrious expounders of nature's laws, we may, in some slight degree, catch their spirit and imitate their example in our earnest researches after truth. Fully endorsing the sentiment contained in these quotations, permit me to invite your attention upon the present occasion to what may properly be considered some of

#### THE MEDICAL PROBLEMS OF THE DAY.

All periods in history are marked by some particular events. These events may be trivial



in their character, or may involve interests of great magnitude. In the history of nations it may be a revolution in government, a signal victory in war, or the brilliant achievements of individuals. In the history of science it may be a new discovery, or a new application of a great principle. The whole history of civilization has been marked by changes of one character or another: but in no department of this history, perhaps, do we meet with changes more significant or striking than in that of medicine. Having its origin some three thousand years ago in Egypt, its earliest records are involved in much obscurity, and made up of fabulous statements. It was intimately blended with the mythology of the times; and as diseases then were supposed to be the visitations of evil spirits, or to be caused by some offended deity, their removal could be effected only by a propitiation of such deities. Among the Grecians possessing a higher degree of refinement and culture, more sensible views of medicine obtained. Hippocrates, one of the most remarkable men that ever lived, by introducing a more correct knowledge of the human body, as well as of the character of disease, was very justly styled the "Father of Medicine." Still, the philosophy, the mythology and superstition of the Greeks entered largely into all medical theories and practices. And even though the boundaries of medical knowledge were extended by experience and observation, and more rational views gradually

prevailed, speculation and empiricism shaped and controlled, in a measure, all investigations upon the subject.

The next great light in medicine was Galen, a man of commanding genius and profound learning. He made still further advances in medical knowledge and practice. As an illustration of the state of medicine and of the times, the opinions and the authority of Hippocrates and Galen directed and controlled the public mind in all such matters for over fifteen hundred years. Then came the pall of the Middle Ages, when the lights of civilization were more or less obscured. Nearly all medical knowledge was engrossed by the Priesthood, and was confined to the cloister and the monastery. But early in the 16th century a new era dawned upon medicine. For the first time, so far as we have any account, a careful dissection of the human body was made, and a description of it published. This honor belongs to Vesalius. From that period, new interest sprang up with reference to the construction and proper uses of the various parts of the body; and for three hundred years the science of Anatomy has been constantly progressing, so that the structure of every organ in the body has come to be very correctly understood.

About the middle of the 17th century, certain important discoveries were made respecting the true functions of particular organs in the body, so that the science of Physiology then took its start. As this science progressed, the evidences

became more and more marked, that alteration of structure, and also of function, constituted or followed a morbid and diseased state of the system. Hence we have the science of Pathology, which in the present century has made wonderful strides. There is still another science—new, comparatively, and more important, in some respects, than either of the others—that of *Hygiene*. Upon these four pillars must be reared the whole structure of medical science. Surgery and Therapeutics are distinct departments of medicine, and may be regarded in their practical application each as an art. But medicine as a science, strictly, is based upon Anatomy, Physiology, Pathology and Hygiene. These have their foundation in the primary and unchangeable laws of nature, and should be ranked among the sciences, as much so as those of Natural History, Geology, Chemistry, &c. And the principal reason why medicine in its early history made so little progress was because the facts and principles of these sciences were so imperfectly understood. The same reason still exists why its progress is so slow, and why there is such a diversity of opinions on most medical subjects. When the facts and laws of Pathology and Hygiene become thoroughly unfolded and applied, it will make a wonderful difference in all matters appertaining to medicine. In the opinion of some writers, it will make an entire revolution in its practice. Both these sciences are now in their infancy, but have a brilliant prospect before them.