

**THE ABUSE OF ALCOHOL
IN THE
TREATMENT OF ACUTE
DISEASES, A REVIEW**

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The abuse of alcohol in the treatment of acute diseases, a review by T. P. Heslop

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T. P. HESLOP

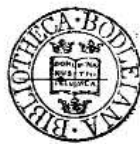
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THE
ABUSE OF ALCOHOL
IN THE TREATMENT OF
ACUTE DISEASES.

A Review.

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PREFACE.

THIS Review was published in the Dublin Quarterly Journal of Medical Science, in 1860, at a period when English Medicine and English Medical Critics seemed to be bound, hand and foot, to the doctrines and practice of the eminent clinical teacher at King's College Hospital. Its publication in that periodical marks the beginning of another tone in the notices of contemporary critics; a tone which has been ever gathering strength from that period to the present time.

The re-publication in a separate shape of essays contributed to periodicals has become a common feature of modern general literature. It is, however, so exceptional in medical writings as almost to deserve to be called a novelty. I find my justification for taking this course in several considerations.

The recent declaration relative to the incautious employment of alcohol in practice was signed by a large number of eminent physicians and surgeons. The necessity for the warnings contained therein is thus confirmed by persons whose position as consulting practitioners must have enabled them to form a judgment as to current modes of treatment. But if that declaration was needful, the renewed publication of this paper can hardly be mistimed.

It seems, moreover, to be useful to note the danger of following mere fashion in medical practice, and to show the ease with which a man of ability can convince himself, his pupils, and the public, for a time, that the facts and reasonings of all previous observers, however trustworthy, were erroneous. In 1860 it was to be in the mode to be a follower of Dr. Todd's therapeutics, and a believer in his doctrines. Many members of the profession lost their balance then, and have never regained it since. They may be possibly helped in their efforts towards effecting it by the perusal of an analysis of these doctrines, in the light of results achieved.

It has also occurred to me that the review department of an Irish journal scarcely constituted the medium best fitted to bring under the notice of English physicians the faulty nature of the teachings of a popular writer. Medical reviews are not much studied by readers of periodicals, being deficient in authority, and the medical journalism of home manufacture offers a sufficiently heavy mass of material to the student.

It will be a source of regret to me if fanatics, whether of temperance or otherwise, seize the title of this *brochure* as offering support to their presumptuous statements. I intend only to draw attention to the improper use, the extravagant employment of an agent capable of rendering inestimable services, under a better guidance. The following pages give no countenance to the opinions of those who, from observing the ill effects of alcohol on healthy individuals, and on the general welfare of a community, argue, or affect to argue that its administration should be withheld in disease. There is no foundation either in logic or in experience for such an inference.

Birmingham, July 1, 1872.

THE ABUSE OF ALCOHOL
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THE recent death of Dr. Todd, in the midst of a career of great usefulness, combined with his important position for many years as a clinical teacher in King's College Hospital, served to throw a deep interest over this book at the moment of its publication ; and, perhaps, at the same time rendered critics more alive to its merits, and less sensible of its faults. After the lapse of six months we still feel the shadow of the lamented and honourable author hovering over his book, intended apparently by himself to be a final and complete exposition of the notion that "much of the practice of former days rests upon the insecure foundation of a partial and imperfect diagnosis of the primary disease, and a very inadequate interpretation of the subsequent phenomena of the case."—p. xi. of *Preface*.

It must be confessed that Dr. Todd has left no doubtful evidence of the wide divergence of his views from those prevalent even among the moderate adherents of the elder school, but has rather chosen to assert his doctrines, and display his practice, in a manner the most unreserved. This is very advantageous for the purposes of controversy ; while the clear method by which he has illustrated his Brounonian practice in the book before us will constitute it, for a long time to come, the text-book of the art of stimulation in *acute* disease ; which, let it be remembered, has ever been accepted as the crucial test of its value. But we venture to predict that this work will be something more. It will be a new starting-point—not from Brown forwards—but in the opposite direction. It will be a landmark in the medical history of our

Clinical Lectures on certain Acute Diseases. By ROBERT BENTLEY TODD, M.D., F.R.S., &c., &c. London : Churchill. 1860. Fcap., 8vo, pp. 487.

time, noting at once the farthest flow of the mighty tide of therapeutical innovations, and specially of resistance to the anti-phlogistic régime, and marking at the same time the commencement of an ebb which possibly may not terminate in this generation. No man can hope to effect more with stimulants than Dr. Todd has done; can use them more freely in all stages of almost all forms of disease, regardless of sex, age, habit, and symptomatic modifications. The young sempstress of eighteen, labouring under typhoid fever, and the veteran drunkard afflicted with phlegmonous erysipelas come in for the same doses of the same fiery stimulant, brandy. How facile the art of medicine must appear to the students of such a clinique! How consoling to the conscience of young men, wanting in self-reliance, and fearful lest something more might have been done to ward off the fatal issue of disease, must be the reflection that the simple exhibition of an ounce of brandy every half-hour, and beef-tea and quinine enemata every four hours, do, form, in very truth, the "law and the prophets" of the *ars medendi*! No man, we say, can hope to improve on Dr. Todd in this aspect; and therefore it becomes us, as critics, to give a full summary of the conclusions arrived at by a teacher so distinguished and so much beloved by a numerous body of students.

In the carefully written Preface the following conclusions are summed up. They are important as giving a clear idea of the whole book:—

"1. That the notion so long prevalent in the schools, that acute disease can be prevented or cured by means which depress and reduce vital and nervous power, is altogether fallacious.

"2. That acute disease is not curable by the direct influence of any form of drug, or any known remedial agent, excepting when it is capable of acting as an antidote, or of neutralizing a poison, on the presence of which, in the system, the disease may depend (*materies morbi*).

"3. That disease is cured by natural processes, to promote which, in their full vigour, vital power must be upheld. Remedies, whether in the shape of drugs, which exercise a special physiological influence on the system, or in whatever form, are useful only so far as they may excite, assist, or promote these natural curative processes.

"4. That it should be the aim of the physician (after he has sedulously studied the clinical history of disease, and made himself master of its diagnosis) to inquire minutely into the intimate nature of these curative processes; their physiology,

so to speak ; to discover the best means of assisting them ; to search for antidotes to morbid poisons ; and to ascertain the best and most convenient methods of upholding vital power."

Dr. Todd then proceeds to hint that the time is coming when the distinction of acute inflammations and acute diseases, in general, into *asthenic* and *sthenic*, will be discarded. This last averment may be fairly taken as illustrative of the author's teaching ; essentially revolutionary and dogmatic, as it appears in this book. It is too obvious that his acquaintance with the classical delineations of disease was far inferior to his acquisitions in modern research, and hardly equal to his great abilities. This must have seriously tended to impress upon his mind a tone of thought, which, for want of a better term, we must be allowed to term 'physiological,' as distinguished from 'clinical.' But this is not sufficient to account for such a statement, opposed, as it is, to daily experience. For the book of nature was ever before him. Illustrations of disease were constantly submitted to his eye, under the most favourable circumstances for careful observation. The fact is, that Dr. Todd commenced his professional career in London when the use, almost indiscriminately among the mass of his brethren, of the antiphlogistic régime nearly rivalled the practice of the immortal Sangrado. His acute mind must have often noted the defects of such a routine ; and his critical observations may have been stimulated the more easily as he had seen in this city—of whose medical school his father was so eminent a member—a mode of viewing and treating disease based essentially upon a thorough appreciation of the depressing nature and proclivities of morbid processes. Nevertheless, it would appear from numerous passages in this volume that Dr. Todd, in his earlier career, rather went with the London stream than with Dublin reminiscences. But a violent reaction was at hand, and in this, the revolutionary epoch of his medical career, he lost his balance. Unhappily, in the midst of a brilliant success, his life was cut off, and all opportunity denied to him of finding in a wise eclecticism that medium between promiscuous antiphlogosis and rash stimulation, which seems to be the final resting-place of all sound medical experience.

The distinction between diseases exhibiting a sthenic character,