Middle Articles

MEDICAL HISTORY

International Congress of Medicine 1867 and Some of the Personalities Involved

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The International Medical Congress of 1867, the first of its kind, was held in Paris from Friday 16 August to Wednesday 28 August. The idea to hold such a gathering to coincide with the Paris exhibition was advanced by Professor Henri Gintrac, of Bordeaux, during the third annual French medical convention held in that city in the year 1865. Though the project was warmly received in France the *British Medical Journal* (1867, 1, 610) feared that the organizers were leaving much undone if they wished it to be truly international: they had, for instance, omitted to invite societies, colleges, and "distinguished personages," so that "the few Englishmen who attend will probably be chiefly excursionists, representing themselves." It is possible, however, that some of the invitations were left in the hands of "the foreign delegates" appointed by the Congress Bureau—Dr. Hermann Beiget, Berlin graduate and physician to the Metropolitan Free Hospital in London, having been one of them. Thus while the only learned societies in the United Kingdom to be represented were the British Medical Association and the Medical Society of London there were no fewer than 18 from the United States. Belgium, France, Holland, Prussia, and Russia were each allocated an honorary member, while Portugal had two: the individual selected for France was the minister of public instruction. Most of these countries and also Bavaria sent a government delegate. Six vice-presidencies went to France and six to other countries, but this time the United Kingdom was represented, in fact by Mr. Victor de Méric, a Glasgow graduate of French origin and fashionable genitourinary surgeon, of 17 Brook Street, London W.1, who found himself in the distinguished company of the great Professor Virchow and Baron Larrey,¹ surgeon to the Emperor Napoleon III. He had done his best to advertise the congress among British doctors and in the columns of the *Lancet*, whose correspondent he was.

Visitors from Overseas

The reputation of La Manche was such as to deter many who otherwise were prepared to follow their portmanteaux on the boat and through *la douane* and the vicissitudes of the railroad journeys: but there were enticements, including a 50% reduction on the ordinary tariff, generously offered by the Compagnie du Nord, thanks to the kind offices of M. de Rothschild, director, and M. Cousin, "chef d'exploitation." Even so, there were "far more Cossacks than English present." At the Congress, de Méric recognized half a dozen London men, and there could have been a few from the country; but he was saddened to find that no one from Great Britain had been chosen to speak in the section on tuberculosis. In fact,

there were 72 "adherents" from the United Kingdom, including Lionel Beale, Burney Yeo, Morell Mackenzie, and 25-year-old Robert Cowie, of Lerwick, one-time surgeon at the Fort Charlotte gaol, and then Medical Officer of Health to the Sumburgh Head and Whalsey Skerries Lighthouse, who proposed to address them on the subject of "prolonged menstruation in the Shetland Islands, and its relation to longevity." Dr. Cowie's name, however, appears on a list of authors who had not made the *acte d'adhésion* because their *mémoires* had not complied with the conditions of the programme.

The only active participants from the British Isles were in fact Victor de Méric, Charles Drysdale, of the Metropolitan Free Hospital, and John Z. Laurence, of 30 Devonshire Street, surgeon at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, Chatham, and at the Southwark Eye Hospital, who presented a case of traumatic aneurysm in the orbit cured by ligation of the common carotid artery. Dr. Edward Tilt, a graduate of Paris and consulting physician to the Farringdon General Dispensary and Lying-In Charity, an authority on female hygiene, was to have read a paper, but in his unavoidable absence it was presented by Dr. Ball, an Englishman naturalized and practising in Paris, and one of the secretaries of the congress. The ruling of *le Bureau* that "long papers will be deposited in the Acts of the Congress" could be interpreted either as an incentive to authors or perhaps as a deterrent.

There were 60 adherents from the United States, seven from Canada, one from the State of Kentucky, and one from the State of California.² There were 333 "founder" members, all Frenchmen, and 300 student tickets were issued, so the total number crowding into the amphitheatre of the School of Medicine sometimes amounted to 1,200 (one report says over 1,500). The flags of many nations decorated the hall, the bare walls of which were clothed with green baize and golden fringes. The "hemicycle" reserved for special dignitaries exhibited "a grand display of red velvet." The president and officials sat in gilt armchairs, but the congressists had to put up with hard benches. As one reporter declared, it was after all but a huge schoolroom. It appears to have been an intensely hot one too.

Patrons

Professor Jean Baptiste Bouillaud, of the Faculté de Paris and consulting physician to the Emperor, presided and Dr. Jaccoud was the general secretary. Others who patronized the congress were Professors Rokitansky, Wertheim, Friedreich,

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¹ Baron Félix-Hippolyte Larrey was the same age as the Emperor, having been born in the year 1808. His distinguished father, Baron Dominique Jean Larrey (1766-1842) had been surgeon-in-chief of the Grande Armée and a personal friend of Napoleon Bonaparte.

² Although these states were listed separately they were admitted to the Union in 1792 and 1850 respectively.

Dr. Robert Cowie

Ernest Hart

Prof. Jaccoud

Victor de Méric

Dr. Ph. Ricord

Dr. A. Robin

Some of the participants in the Congress.

Fallot, Robin, Broca, Tardieu, Vidal, Hughes Bennett, and William Stokes, and Dr. Inman, of Liverpool, but how many of them actually attended and paid their 20 francs it is not possible to say.

In his inaugural address the president spoke of his city with considerable warmth, even going so far as to quote from Casimir Delavigne—"La France, c'est Paris, et Paris c'est le monde." He welcomed them all, and without wishing to be profane believed their congress could be regarded as a *concile médical oecuménique*. People, he said, were travelling more and frontiers and physical barriers, including the Atlantic ocean, were counting for less and less. He reminded them that there had been an isolated medical congress in Paris in the year 1845.

Evidently the atmosphere at first was formal and frigid, but after the first few sessions it became less stiff. The congress was conducted entirely in French, and this was the reason why Dr. Cowie's paper was declined. Mr. de Méric seems to have spoken well and made a good impression. It was he who presented the report of the Harveian Society on the prevention of venereal disease, the committee, consisting of Tilbury Fox, Henry Maudsley, Victor Bazire, Beigel, Drysdale, and himself, having being set up after the passing of the Contagious Diseases (Amending) Act of 1866. Nevertheless de Méric, one-time Jacksonian Prize essayist, in a speech on the control of "une maison de tolérance de Londres," did not find favour with the reporter of the *British Medical Journal*, who doubted if "this very meritorious specialist and syphilographer" appreciated the sentiments of his adopted country. No respectable doctor could allow himself to be the servant of a brothel-keeper for purposes of allowing women to continue in sin.

Incidents

In general the meetings seem to have been quiet and amicable, but there were a few incidents. The first was when Dr. van Lohe, of Amsterdam, complained that the presentations thus far had been but a series of pathological lectures, and he demanded that the meeting forthwith proceed to a discussion of the many practical problems concerned with tuberculosis. But he was overruled by the president, who said that the programme had been sent out well in advance for all to see and that they would keep strictly to it. Another incident occurred when Professor Palasciano, of Naples, boasted that the legal status of members of the medical profession had vastly improved since Italy had become a free country. No longer were they bound, as in other European countries including France, to inform on their patients when, in the course of their professional duties, they learned that they were treating lawbreakers. This evidently upset the president and other Frenchmen too, but the Italians were left in no doubt that any French doctor would rather himself break the law than inform on his patient. An anxious Professor Bouillaud closed the proceedings as soon as he could, pointing out that such questions as they were discussing could not be raised in open meeting without the express permission of the French Government, and such permission would almost surely not be given.

The most dramatic incident, however, was when a tall grey-headed gentleman stood up and proclaimed in a loud voice,

"Je suis médecin, syphilité, et je me porte bien." This arose in the course of a most heated argument between Dr. Auzias-Turenne, who was recommending repeated inoculation as a means of rendering a prostitute resistant to the disease, and Professor Ricord, the chairman of the meeting and a vice-president of the congress, who was utterly opposed to the idea. The chairman, who "boiled with indignation," chided Dr. Auzias-Turenne for not having, like others, experimented on himself if he had faith in his claim. M. Crocq, of Brussels, apparently in an attempt to quieten the meeting, asked facetiously if it was expected of him, the official delegate of his country, to return and advise his government to syphilize all Belgians. A much applauded moment seems to have been when Dr. Lombard, of Geneva, in a discussion on the effects of climate on health, ended by shouting, "Death to malaria!"

Perhaps the most eagerly awaited of the speakers was Dr. Brown-Séquard, who was due to discuss the early signs of cerebral disease; but, alas for his many admirers, the sudden illness and death from a ruptured aneurysm of the basilar artery of his young former colleague and fellow Mauritian Victor Bazire, assistant physician at the National Hospital for Epilepsy and Paralysis, had called him to London.

Social Occasions

Between two and three hundred attended the banquet which was held at the Grand Hotel, Professor Virchow being placed on the president's right. One of the speakers was Dr. Ernest Hart, editor of the *British Medical Journal*, who hoped that one day such a congress would be held in London. In the course of the evening the president broke the news of the death that morning of Professor Alfred Armand Louis Marie Velpeau, who with great distinction had held the chair of clinical surgery in Paris for 32 years. The request that the Congress should attend at his funeral was "carried by universal acclamation." The death of this man, who was regarded as the king of French surgeons, so soon after that of the great Armand Trousseau (23 June), cast a gloom over the whole congress.

Social occasions seem to have been few, but Dr. Marion Sims, who in the summer of 1862 had left New York and the hospital he had founded, on the *Great Eastern* with a return ticket, laid on "brilliant hospitality" at his handsome residence in the rue du Faubourg St. Honoré which, said one reporter, redounded greatly to the credit of America. In his short time in Paris his gynaecological prowess had brought him wealthy patients and important friends, including the Duchess of Hamilton, the Empress Eugénie, and the Emperor himself. He was in fact a familiar figure in Paris society and at Baden-Baden, and had even enjoyed the entrée to St. Cloud.

Success and Failure

According to the many accounts of this congress it proved a success if only for the reason that the French organizers had brought together men of different nations. But this success was deemed to be due entirely to the guests, because many of the leaders of French medicine did not attend and hospital officials were *en vacances*. It failed because the programme was

rigid and did not provide sufficient time for discussion and because it was intelligible only to those fluent in the French language. This must have been the reason for the regrettable and "too absolute silence maintained by a number of the most distinguished of our countrymen" (*Brit. med. J.*, 1867, 2, 259). It failed most of all because apart from the banquet there was no opportunity for doctors to meet each other outside the amphitheatre. No reading-room, lounge, or refreshment room had been provided; nor was there an official reception. There was, in fact, "an entire absence of hospitality, or even of public courtesies" (*Brit. med. J.*, 1867, 2, 254): this particular censure may well have been provoked by the unfortunate mismanagement of a banquet intended for medical journalists, to which the editors of almost all the principal journals "were forgotten to be invited." We are told that several Paris journalists, presumably also overlooked, regarded the congress as a comparative failure.

Nevertheless the topics seem to have been well chosen, and some of them, like the control of venereal disease, pointed a way which led eventually to the formation of the World Health Organization. Other subjects to engage the attention of members were postoperative accidents and the acclimatization of Europeans in the tropics.

An early report in the *Lancet*, as if to upbraid its readers for failing to support the congress, dwells on the amenities of Paris, adding "neither are English taverns wanting." But unfortunately this first of international medical gatherings was held near the time of the Annual Meeting of the British Medical Association and that of the British Association, which together attracted most of the doctors given to travel, and it is certain that Dublin and Dundee provided all necessary entertainment as well as good scientific fare.

Marion Sims, a native of South Carolina and a naturally happy man, was distressed by the Civil War, and it was during these sad years that his love for Europe matured. Thereafter he led a somewhat restless life between the two continents, spending the greater part on this side of the Atlantic, where, as he was prepared to admit, the wealthy patients were more likely to be found.

Victor de Méric, when he returned to London, would have been pleased to find that the correspondent of the *Edinburgh*

Medical Journal, who seems to have been Professor J. Hughes Bennett, had praised him for his part in the scientific meetings. As surgeon at the Royal Free, German, and French Hospitals he seems to have been a busy man. He was also a corresponding member of the Imperial Medical Society of Lyons. He later moved from 17 to 52 Brook Street, and was eventually joined in practice by his son, who had qualified in 1871. He died in 1876 at the age of 65, and the obituary notice in the *British Medical Journal* described him as a genial man and an honourable character.

Robert Cowie published his paper, which in effect had been his graduation thesis, in response to the request of a Danish doctor who had read an abstract of it in *L'Union Médicale* and was interested in the subject. It was therefore incorporated in a short history and account of the Shetland Islands published by Cowie in 1871. It includes a description of an epidemic of "epilepsy" in women churchgoers some fifty years earlier on days when the weather was warm and the preacher "pathetic." The distressing fits, often accompanied by dismal cries and fixation of the eyes, were attributed to superpolarity of the nervous system resulting from religious fervour. When, however, the ingenious minister announced a new form of treatment for this distemper, to consist of immersion in the fresh-water loch facing the kirk, no further case occurred.

Cowie, a tall, powerful man, had received his medical training in Aberdeen and Edinburgh, and had joined his father in practice shortly before the latter's death in 1866. He was well liked by everybody and held many public appointments, including that of Inspector of Lemon Juice for the Northern District of Scotland and honorary surgeon to the 1st Orkney and Shetland Rifles. A few days after revising the second edition of his charming little book he developed symptoms of acute inflammation of the bowels, and 26 hours later, on 1 May 1874, died, greatly lamented, at the early age of 32. Through this tragic death the island crofters lost a fine friend and the profession a geographically isolated member who had been ready to play his humble part in representing his colleagues at the First International Congress of Medicine.

The photograph of Victor de Méric was supplied by the Royal College of Surgeons of England. We are indebted to Mr. E. J. F. Clausen, Shetland Islands, for supplying the picture of Dr. Robert Cowie.

IS THERE AN ALTERNATIVE?

A suggestion that is frequently made is that a quinquennial system of finance for the Health Service would greatly increase financial flexibility. This system has now been in operation for the universities for almost 80 years, and in his article below Mr. Alexander McWilliam discusses some aspects of its history and working.

Yearly or Quinquennial Grants?

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An earlier article in this series examined the suggestion of taking medicine out of politics by creating a public corporation.¹ Keeping universities out of politics has been a matter of concern since they first received State support, and a unique system of grants-in-aid has been evolved to achieve this aim. In fact the University Grants Committee has been described² as "one of the most felicitous constitutional inventions of this century" and "characteristic British solution to a problem which many have thought to be logically insoluble, namely the combination of the benefits of State support for this branch of higher educa-

tion with the benefits of an orderly freedom on behalf of the institutions subsidized."

Evolution of System

The Scottish universities were the first to receive support from public funds through Parliament. In 1831 they were placed on an annual parliamentary vote, and Parliament itself considered and decided academic issues. London was the first English university to receive grants, and was followed by the Welsh university colleges. From the start there were misgivings about State support for universities. The Treasury³ held that

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