THE
PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE,
OF THE
BRITISH MEDICAL ASSOCIATION :

*Being Abstract of an Address delivered at the Annual Meeting
of the Metropolitan Counties Branch, July 15th.*

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GENTLEMEN,—My first duty, on taking this chair, is to thank you for the mark of confidence to which the honourable position of being elected your President for the ensuing year bears witness. It shall be my duty and my pleasure, with your aid and your forbearance, to retain that confidence undiminished to the close of my year of office—a year which can scarcely fail to be one of great importance in the history of our Association. For it will include the meeting for the second time in London of the Parent Society. The Metropolitan Counties Branch initiated the steps which have led to this visit, and on the Metropolitan Counties Branch will largely depend the success of the approaching meeting.

Gentlemen, it is not my desire to occupy your attention with any very lengthened observations in the form of an address. Within a very few days, you will hear Sir William Fergusson, my distinguished predecessor in this chair, address you as members of a much larger audience, from a higher rostrum, after a more comprehensive fashion, and with far greater ability and weight than are at my disposal. You will likewise hear the learned orators who have, each in his special sphere, undertaken to address you, illustrate at length subjects specially worthy of the attention of an Association like ours. Under these circumstances, it seems to me that I should but ill requite your confidence by occupying at any length the brief time we have this afternoon at our disposal, partly for the performance of the necessary business of our Branch, but still more, I am thankful to say, for rest, and for some social recreation. Still it may be well, at the present epoch in the Society's history, to say a few words as to what it has been and is doing, and to anticipate something of its future history—to assume for a few minutes the character of the historian and the prophet.

We all know that the Association was founded by Sir Charles Hastings, on the 17th of the present month, in the year 1832, at a meeting of some fifty medical men in the boardroom of the Worcester Infirmary. This meeting was addressed on that occasion by the founder, who for many years subsequently acted as Honorary Secretary and as Treasurer. And who, I need scarcely tell you, never ceased to take an active and abiding interest in the Association until his lamented death in 1866. In the first address to the Society, he expressed a hope that the new Association would “exercise no inconsiderable influence on the progress of medical science, feeling” (as he did) “the disadvantage under which the prosecutors of medicine resident in English provincial towns have laboured, in consequence of the want of any system of co-operation, by which their separate exertions for the promotion of our knowledge of the healing art may be so united as to render them more influential and more extensively useful.” He enumerated the objects of the Association as being :

“1. The collection of useful information, whether speculative or practical, through original essays, or reports of provincial hospitals, infirmaries, or dispensaries, or of private practice.

“2. Increase of knowledge of the medical topography of England through statistical, meteorological, geological, and botanical inquiries.

“3. Investigation of the modifications of endemic and epidemic diseases in different situations and at various periods, so as to trace, so far as the present imperfect state of the art will permit, their connections with peculiarities of soil or climate, or with the localities, habits, and occupations of the people.

“4. Advancement of medico-legal science, through succinct reports of whatever cases may occur in provincial courts of judicature.

“5. Maintenance of the honour and respectability of the profession generally in the provinces, by promoting friendly intercourse and free communication of its members, and by establishing among them the

harmony and good feeling which ought ever to characterise a liberal profession.”

The founder of our Association long enjoyed the happiness of witnessing the realisation of his hopes and anticipations, whether looking to the number who joined the Association as members, or to its achievements. At the close of the first year of its existence, the number of members was 310. In the year 1842, at the end of the first decade, the number was 1,300; eight years ago it was a few over 2,000; whilst the number at the present moment falls little short of 5,500. The average increase of members during each of the last six years has been at the rate of 600. And here it is but just to observe that this increase is coincident with the vast improvement which has taken place in the management of our JOURNAL in the hands of the present editor, Mr. Ernest Hart. The results of that management are before us and speak for themselves, in facts more gratifying to Mr. Hart than any words of mine could be. Contrast the JOURNAL of to-day with the JOURNAL of the past, which I hold in my hand, and let the difference signify the progress of our Society.

Looking to the achievements of the Association, whether of a medico-political or of a scientific character, we shall find that they have been neither few nor unimportant. Passing over minor events, we observe that, as early as 1834, the subject of Provident dispensaries enlisted the sympathies of the Association. This subject is now attracting much attention in connection with the abuse of the system of out-patient hospital relief. The question of gratuitous relief has been before our Branch of the Association more or less since the year 1853. I may mention that, as the result of recent proceedings, a special committee of the Charity Organisation Society has been appointed to consider the subject, which has obtained the notice, not only of the metropolitan but of the provincial press, notably at Manchester, and of such intelligent and energetic laymen as Sir Charles Trevelyan and Mr. Bosanquet. The deplorable system of indiscriminate gratuitous medical relief, alike injurious to those who give and to those who receive it, can scarcely fail to be modified or improved, now that attention has been so widely directed to its results.

The efforts of the Association to ameliorate the mode of administration of the Poor-law, and more especially of the conditions of service of medical men under those laws, have been continuous. As early as 1836, the Association recommended that drugs should be paid for, or be supplied independently of the salaries of the medical officers—advice tardily, and even not yet universally, followed. The Association achieved a great success when it accomplished the abolition of the wretched system of tendering for Poor-law medical appointments, as the butchers and bakers tendered for the supply of meat and bread. This sort of Dutch auction, degrading to a learned profession, had led to the appointment of persons holding no legal qualification, of whom there were found to be so appointed not fewer than 238 individuals.

The early efforts of the Association were marked by a very considerable provision of what was required for the interests of the profession and the public in reference to “medical reform.” It spoke, in one of its earliest manifestoes, of the necessity for establishing reciprocity of practice, with sufficiency and uniformity of qualification. Other points of interest subsequently arose; but the two points just mentioned have been from the first, as they are at the present, the objects of chief importance. Time does not afford an opportunity for now entering on this wide question. Suffice it to say, that the Act of 1858, whilst conferring on all licensing bodies the power to give a qualification to practise anywhere through the kingdom, secured one of the objects sought for by the Association, viz., what was then called reciprocity of practice. In other words, a license conferred by any one of the nineteen licensing bodies, constituted a license to practise in any part of Great Britain and Ireland. The second object of the Association, viz., uniformity of qualification (and, in speaking of the Association, I do not mean to limit this aim and object to the Association alone) was, by an improvident policy, allowed to be separated from the first; hence has arisen a just cause of complaint, that our *Medical Register* is a register of legally qualified, but that it is by no means a register of invariably fully competent, practitioners. Hence it is that we still have discussion on conjoint schemes, on one portal to the profession, and so on.

If the original proposals of the Association had been adopted, there would exist no ground for such discussion. But, unfortunately, the Act of 1858 left any such conjoint action of licensing bodies purely voluntary, as it left much besides. It left the Medical Council open to the charge of doing little, whilst it gave that body no authority to insist on anything being done. It gave authority to approve of co-operation amongst licensing bodies, but not to compel it. The Medical Bill of 1870, which never became more than a Bill, supplied this defect in the original Act. It proposed a scheme which would to the fullest extent have carried out the intentions of the fathers of medical reform amongst

our associates. This Bill, had it become law, would have secured uniformity and sufficiency of qualification amongst medical practitioners. But, alas! newer notions of medical reform arose amongst us; and some notably amongst the members of our Medical Reform Committee, insisting on what they call "direct representation", succeeded in setting aside the Bill which would have secured the second great object for which our early reformers contended, and which was within our reach. In grasping the shadow, I grieve to see we have lost the substance. We have sacrificed the really important for the unimportant; for, whilst all admit the paramount value of a sufficient and uniform qualification for men entering the profession, many believe that this direct representation would be but a source of expense and trouble without any corresponding advantages. They believe that the members chosen by popular election would not differ in character, in aspiration, or in ability, from those who constitute the Council as at present. They believe, too, that the duties imposed on the Medical Council, if they were legally authorised to carry them out, viz. to insure competence in professional knowledge of all persons claiming a right to be placed on the *Register*, in securing accuracy in that *Register*, in removing from it those whose characters may disgrace it, and in publishing a *Pharmacopœia*—they believe that those duties would be as well performed by the Council constituted as at present, as by any other mode of election. They see in periodical elections the elements of rivalries, of agitations, and of strifes; and they do not see corresponding advantages in the results. They appeal to experience in cases in which a partial trial of a like system may be witnessed, and to similar contests from which some of the best men stand aloof, whilst mere seniority, backed by an active canvass, has sufficed to secure a place.

I confess that I am one of those who lament the loss of a Bill which secured a compulsory and an uniform test for candidates entering the profession; and that I am also one of those who do not think direct representation of paramount importance. I feel that we are contesting against a sentimental, and not a real, grievance; and that we ought, with all the power of this Association, to adhere to the original aims of our reformers—"reciprocity of practice and uniformity of qualification."

Whilst thus referring to the medico-political character of the Association, we must not lose sight of its scientific, its social, and ethical functions. During the earlier years of its existence, volumes of *Transactions* were published to the number of nineteen. These volumes testify to the scientific work which provincial practitioners are capable of accomplishing. Here is a volume distinguished amongst its fellows for containing the classical memoir on variola vaccinia by Mr. Ceely—a provincial practitioner who is, happily, still spared to us, an honour to his profession and his class; and the series contains many essays of scarcely less importance. We have no longer these annual volumes of *Transactions*; but the *JOURNAL* bears weekly evidence of the scientific activity which the Association has developed in every corner of the country, whilst its Branch meetings encourage local practitioners to note and to record their experiences which would otherwise have been lost.

Of the ethical function of the Society, one need only say that the mere fact of association and the declared attachment to high and recognised principles has established an influence difficult to over-estimate. The code thus widely spread and practically maintained throughout the country is not less elevated than that which rules amongst the highest of our corporate bodies, and will take its place where no such corporate rules exist. We happily now seldom hear of professional squabbles, or of any gross infringement of professional propriety—results greatly due, I believe, to the working and to the influence of our Association; for examples of stern repression of such infringement amongst the most eminent, as well as the least distinguished, are not wanting, though happily they are few in the history of our body. With regard to the social influence of the Association, we can refer to the generous and friendly feelings which have been evoked year after year, both at the Branch and district meetings, as well as at our great annual gatherings. These influences have not been confined to England, but are finding a response in Scotland and in Ireland. Let us hope, and let us try to realise the expectation, that the approaching meeting may afford a type of all the most useful energies and functions of the Association in reference alike to its scientific and to its social aspects.

At these meetings, old friendships are revived, new friendships are formed. Visitors are made familiar, under the best auspices, with all objects of interest in the localities which they visit. Whether these objects geological or topographical, purely scientific or historical; whether they be the works of Nature or of man, our associates see all under the best guidance—that of their professional brethren. Need I seek to illustrate further the interest and value of these meetings by referring to the condensed epitome of scientific progress placed before us at each meeting in the addresses of our President, and of the appointed orators?

If after this brief retrospect, we look to the future, we can recognise a vast and widening prospect of increasing usefulness. When we remember that the thousands of whom we have spoken are men of high education, of elevated principles, aiming at objects which are essentially those of the public good, we can scarcely conceive the existence of a greater power for the accomplishment of nobler objects. That power is already making itself felt in every department. The power of association is great, and never before has such a numerous band of the members of one profession been brought together for common objects. We shall include ere long 6,000 members; and if the present rate of increase continue, we may hope at the close of another decade to number 10,000 members.

We may refer to the future of the Association as to its past in its political and scientific aspect. That we have a Public Health Act at all, may be said to be chiefly due to the efforts of our Association, and the names of our associates, Drs. Stokes, Acland, Patrick Stewart, and Rumsey, will be ever associated with that great and life-saving measure of sanitary progress. Had the plan laid down by the Association been more closely followed, the results would have been more satisfactory than they are.

We should not have seen the country mapped out into districts confused, irregular, and so destitute of plan that, whilst some are utterly unworkable from their extent and irregular character, trusting to chance for subordinate arrangements, others are as mischievously small and devoid of any controlling influence whatever. In one case we have heads without limbs, and in the other limbs without heads. Nor should we see the skilled medical staff of the Local Government Board obliged to look on idly whilst lawyers, military officers, and county gentlemen—all good men in their way—are called upon to perform duties for which they are necessarily incompetent from want of technical education. To have such gentlemen as government inspectors of the administration of the public health laws, is not less absurd than it would be to appoint doctors of Medicine or of Divinity to inspect the working of the circuits of the County Court judges. There is no object, it seems to me to which a portion of the energies of this great Association could be more fitly devoted, than in trying to counteract and correct these signal and disastrous errors of administration in an important department of the government, and in insisting that our profession, both in respect for itself and in its duty to the public, should have its proper place in the new organisation. Never was there a better opportunity of placing the sanitary administration of the country on a satisfactory footing than that afforded by the Health Acts of 1871-2, and never have the public funds of the country, given with unprecedented liberality, been more entirely wasted, so far as the Local Government Board has hitherto gone, in the creation of a machinery without plan or order, which can but end in comparative failure.

The Association has rendered great service in the past to the Army and Navy Medical Services, and it is at this moment exerting its influence, with every probability of success, to secure these services against the encroachments made by the recent warrant on privileges not long since accorded to them. I may remark that the Parliamentary Bills Committee, which originated with this Branch, but is now so extended as to include and to represent the full power of our Association, is doing most excellent work. No measure is or can be brought before Parliament, affecting the public health or any branch of the profession in either of the three countries, which is not brought before that committee, or on which it does not exercise its influence in modifying it so as to secure their interests.

Looking to the scientific future of the Association, we can desire but that the Branches should pursue their course of prosperous activity; that the *JOURNAL* should continue to maintain its vigour, and to publish for all the results of the scientific labours of each branch; these are rich mines which can be worked for years to come with success. In no better manner can the stores of experience and information, gathered by the busy practitioners in the country or in our great towns and cities, be brought to light and utilised. I think there are many ways by which the Branches may be made more useful even than at present; the system of appointing local branch committees throughout the country for definite objects has not yet been sufficiently developed.

1. For example, how valuable and important would be the reports of local committees, working in their several districts according to a systematic method from year to year, on the influence of trades and occupations on health and mortality, and on the effects of legislation and other measures intended for their improvement.

2. If local committees were appointed to report, quarterly, on an uniform plan, on the ordinary or reigning epidemic or endemic diseases, such as the committee of the *Société des Hôpitaux* in Paris, these reports, digested by a central committee, would afford such a contem-

porary picture of the epidemic constitution of the country as has never yet been attained, and as would throw a light on the etiology, course, and natural history of disease, such as for centuries we have vainly sought.

3. Questions like that raised by a recent committee of the Lancashire and Cheshire Branch, viz., the duration of infection in contagion, might be still more effectually carried out if all the Branches concerned should join in their inquiry by co-operating committees. The scheme which I would suggest would in outline be this. Any Branch having resolved on an investigation, such, for example, as that proposed at Manchester, having drawn out its plan and prepared its schedule, might submit its views to the Committee of Council, by whom they would be adopted and recommended to all the Branches for the use of a committee of each Branch. The reports so obtained from the several Branches would be collected at definite intervals, and collated by a central committee. This plan might be adopted for any one of the subjects to which I am now referring, and the annual general meeting could not be more profitably engaged than in the consideration and discussion of such reports. Indeed, it does seem to me, that the time of our annual meeting might be greatly utilised, if reports and communications on definite subjects previously arranged should be systematically brought forward in the several sections, rather than that papers on a variety of subjects should be read, or described as read, as they have hitherto been. For this purpose, previously selected subjects, such, for example, as the etiology and communicability of cholera, the comparative value of anæsthetics, etc., might be discussed at length.

4. There are also many points connected with therapeutical investigations, in which the labours of committees might be healthfully employed. Our knowledge of morbid texture and morbid anatomy approaches perfection. Our pathological information has made rapid advances. We are no longer content with describing disease in the gross. The microscope reveals to us its intimate structure, and experimental pathology is telling us how these morbid changes come to take place. We connect, too, these changes with the phenomena which they present during life, and thus are established means of diagnosis which insure an amount of accuracy previously unattainable; but, alas! our means of curing disease do not make equally rapid progress. This is not, as some assert, because disease cannot be cured; it is simply because our knowledge of remedies is deficient. If, knowing the character of the morbid process and its result, we were equally well informed as to the means by the application of which this morbid process could be controlled, we would at once be able to establish a system of scientific therapeutics.

This time must come. Our age has witnessed the solution of more difficult problems; and when the time does arrive, our knowledge will enable us to say, this is such and such a morbid process, and to add, that such and such an agent exercises a direct influence over it. One will be able to assert, "I know that if I prescribe this or that agent the patient will be cured." When that time comes, and I repeat my conviction that it will come, our profession will take that rank which power confers, and we shall no longer be looked on with suspicious indulgence, it may be, as the practitioners of an art which has, in too many instances, mere chance for its chief ally.

I can well conceive some of our Associates helping forward such inquiries, and submitting them to the appreciation of the meetings of our Association hereafter.

Having said so much on the Association generally, let me say a few words about our special Branch of it. This Branch, I need not remind you, was founded in 1852, as the Metropolitan Counties Branch, the Association still retaining its provincial title. Mr. Baker, the President of the Association, happily referred to the event in his able address at Birmingham last year in the following words.

"Permit me to congratulate you on that most important decision which was proposed and carried at a special general meeting, held in this place in 1856, which changed the title from Provincial to British. The nationality of the aims which it was sought to accomplish have been thereby declared and accepted; and its name has consequently become imperial. This is not only right in itself, but is an act of the simplest justice to our esteemed metropolitan members, who have freely joined our ranks, have aided their provincial colleagues by counsel and labour, and have exhibited deep interest in the management and success of our enterprise. Their fraternal conduct proves the soundness of the effort made to gather the army of medical practitioners in this country under one banner, to unite their strength, and to direct it into those channels in which it may be best exerted for the public good. It is also a graceful admission that, whilst London cannot fail, from its magnitude, its gigantic opportunities, and its liberal rewards, to attract and foster the ripest intellects, the most commanding genius that this country produces, it arrogates to itself no claim to a monopoly of talent, no despotic control of general medical policy."

At the close of the first decade the Branch numbered 132 members, now, at the close of a second decade, it numbers more than 500 members. And of members resident in the metropolitan counties the Association has, I believe, more than 900.

This Branch, founded, and having its fixed seat in, the metropolis, has always had peculiar and distinctive features. Surrounded by purely medical societies, it has found its most useful influence in discussing medico-political, sanitary, and social questions, rather than in aiming at scientific discussion, otherwise adequately provided for. Its proximity to the seat of legislation, and the personal influence of many of its members with members of the legislature, have enabled the Branch to exercise a most salutary influence in many measures of great public importance. I have said that the Parliamentary Bills Committee originated with us; and when we look back to the activity of the Branch, and to the results of its influence, we shall see that it has done much, for example, in promoting amendment in the laws of public vaccination, and in the reform of hospital administration and of the public services generally. Twice this Branch has had the good fortune to induce the British Medical Association to hold its meetings in London, from the first of which, in 1862, dates a great access of power and influence to the Association; and it is not too much to anticipate like results from the meeting which we are now about to entertain.

Finally, let me say that an impressive lesson may be learnt from this brief review of the numbers, the power, the intelligence, and the grants of this Association. Its objects are high and well-defined; its influence is great and growing; surely, then, it behoves all of us who have influence in the Councils and the work of the Association—and few of us are without such influence—to be heedful that we guide aright the direction of these vast energies. Let us bring to our work in the Association our best intelligence, our most mature thought, our calmest judgment, our most brotherly feeling; especially let us be sure that we aim always at making the Association a means of union and strength for the whole professional body, an instrument in elevating the moral, social, and scientific character of our profession and of advancing the public good, with which all our best aims are intimately allied. These were the objects which the founders of the Association had in view; they are those which it has followed, and it behoves us still steadily to pursue them. While we do so, we may feel sure that the future can but have in store for us years, it may be of difficulty or of trial, but certainly of usefulness and ultimate satisfaction.

SCIENCE TEACHING.—The last report just issued by the Science and Art Department shows that some progress has been made with advanced scientific instruction. Last year it was decided to remove the College of Chemistry from Oxford Street, and the instruction in physics and biology from the Royal School of Mines in Jermyn Street to the new buildings at South Kensington. The instruction in physics and biology had hitherto consisted of lectures only. It is now supplemented by laboratory practice. Eight teachers have been brought up for training at each of the courses, which are much longer and more complete than the special summer courses for provincial teachers. The number of students, including the Royal Exhibitioners, who attended the entire course of instruction for the diploma of associate during the session of 1871-72 was 20, or five more than in the session of 1870-71. The greatest increase, however, which has occurred since the foundation of the school was in October last, when the courses of instruction in physics and biology were transferred to the new buildings at South Kensington. The number of students at present attending the full course is 33, being 13 more than the maximum of previous years; 148 occasional students attended one or more of the courses in 1871-72, showing an increase of 26 as compared with the number in 1870-71. The number of students attending the practical course of instruction in chemical analysis and manipulation given in Oxford Street and in the new schools at South Kensington, to which the college was removed on October 1st, was much larger during 1872 than at any previous period; and Dr. Frankland reports that soon after the opening of the new laboratories every available place was occupied. The return of the number of individual students for the three terms of 1871-72 presents an increase of 64 on the attendance in the preceding session; the respective totals being 148 in 1871 and 212 in 1872. The number of students in the Royal School of Naval Architecture and Marine Engineering was 35, of whom 30 were sent by the Admiralty. The School is to be closed at the end of the present session.