AN ADDRESS

ON THE

OBJECTS AND RESULTS OF MEDICAL ASSOCIATION.

Delivered at the Thirty-second Annual Meeting of the South-Eastern Branch of the British Medical Association, at Maidstone, on Wednesday, June 14th, 1876.

By STEPHEN MONCKTON, M.D.,

Physician to the West Kent General Hospital; President of the Branch.

VICE-PRESIDENTS AND GENTLEMEN,—I acknowledge with gratitude the position which the Council of this, our South-Eastern Branch, has called upon me to occupy. The office of President for the year is an honourable one, and I thank those who have selected me to fill it; while relying on a continuance of the same kindness to advise and support me in carrying on the duties, not only of this annual meeting, but of the next twelve months. It is a post also of responsibility; for a high level has to be maintained. “*Vixere fortes ante Agamemnona multi*,” and each succeeding Agamemnon, while he occupies the throne, must strive to uphold all the dignity with which his predecessors have adorned it. The last annual meeting held in Maidstone was in the year 1860; the Branch numbered at that time but comparatively few members; it consists to-day of 416. This rate of progress enhances the satisfaction with which, in the next place, I tender you for my brethren and myself a hearty welcome to the chief town of Kent.

Of that town it may interest some of you to hear a few particulars; it occupies the bottom of a basin some six miles in diameter, upon the stream of the Medway, nearly at the junction of its middle and lower thirds, containing a population of about 30,000. The basin is walled in effectively by hills on the east and west, but opens out through the river-valley to the north and south. The soil, pervious above, rests on deep and fissured limestone rock below, inviting the very common but reprehensible practice of discharging all the sewage-matters of a dwelling-house into a vast tank behind it; the unbricked bottom of which allows the liquid to soak away through the rock, while the solids accumulate so slowly as to need removal only about once in a generation. That this custom has not made itself more mischievously felt by contamination of the wells is a mercy and a marvel. The natural springs yield, as a rule, an abundant and beautiful supply of hard water, which is supplemented by the service of a company, which, though energetically administered, is weighted with the consequences of a fundamental error, which located the works at starting in a spot devoid of water. The air is relaxing; anæmic tendencies abound; hence it happens, though our death-rate is low, and epidemics not above the average, that disease is with some difficulty shaken off; Maidstone is known to be a bad place to get well in. It is, moreover, an ancient town, and archaeological tongues of no mean eminence have been lately delighting us with the history of its bygone glories; carrying us back some hundreds of years to the period when the Archbishop of Canterbury occupied his palace here, not only as prince of the church, but as *facile princeps* in secular matters also. The power of the keys in his hands seems to have covered far more than the ordinary ecclesiastic area, for he held personal sway over the parish stocks, the borough watchhouse, and the county gaol. If a condemned prisoner chanced to escape, fines and penalties were forthwith levied on his Grace; or, to speak more correctly, *through* his Grace, for he was empowered to amerce the townsfolk to the requisite amount, and to discharge his liabilities out of their pockets. The primate is still rector of Maidstone; his collegiate church, with the ancient palace and its surroundings, are among the objects to which your attention will be invited this afternoon. Our natural history is satisfactory also; though devoid of coal and iron, we are fairly off for *tin*; though gold is not found in our gullies, we supply the paper out of which they make bank notes; the soil is good for miles around us. Thanks to its suitability for fruit and hops, landlords and tenantry thrive alike, and, by a process of secondary assimilation, the town and its doctors are nourished and maintained. Maidstone about covers the area overlying the green sand—a curious and minute item in the great wealden formation. Its limestone rock has supplied at different periods a name to the town, a factor in its commercial prosperity, and a number of instructive fossils, some of which you may study to day in this museum, while others gladden geologic eyes in the great metropolis. The leading element in our population is, of course, the medical; we number, including house-surgeons and other neophytes, about twenty-four,

and are singularly healthy; hydropathy, cancer-curing, and quackery, are quite unknown among us. An outbreak of homœopathy will occasionally occur, but even this complaint assumes happily the intermittent rather than the continued form. Our *morale* is excellent; we are all very good fellows, and almost all belong to the British Medical Association. It is no light thing to add deliberately that if anyone of the twenty-four should fail to appear at the dinner-table this evening, he will be unable to plead as an excuse that the other twenty-three would not have been pleased to see him. Amusing anecdotes are extant illustrative of a very different state of things; but that of course was before the institution of the South-Eastern Branch.

Questions are asked as to the *raison d'être* of our Association, as to the necessity for its JOURNAL, and the utility of its meetings; these inquiries meet with an ample answer this afternoon. A steady increase in number, as reported by the Secretary; a solid sufficiency in finance; the circulation at so cheap a rate of the best medical journal afloat; the countenance given to local gathering by the presence of so many eminent friends; above all, the conviction we feel that it is good for us to be here, are quite enough to waft us beyond the clouds of doubt and misgiving into the serene atmosphere of conscious right. Nor does the appeal lie to consciousness alone; it may be carried into the court of reason without fear of the result. Let us consider the matter for such minutes as we may fitly give, and that in a practical way, as it affects hardworking country doctors.

Our Association, like the fifth nerve, is trifacial; it contemplates—

1. The promotion of scientific knowledge;
2. The regulation of our own professional intercourse;
3. The recognition of our duties to society at large.

1. An assiduous member of our Association becomes, *ipso facto*, a clinical clerk for life; he should feel under a special obligation to observe with care, and medical practice begins and ends with observation; to the duties directly belonging to the practitioner, he adds the further responsibility of a trustee. Periodically meeting his brethren at the different towns, and gathering the fruits of their experience, he is pledged by propriety not to go always empty-handed himself, but to glean, and then distribute, some material in return. The vast amount of work done, year by year, by the profession over a given district, yields in this way experience that is a common property, and we are bound, by our very membership, to keep the “*nemo sibi vivat*” continually in mind. I need detain you with no argument to enforce this point; how very evident is it that if every man now present were to practise henceforth with a keen look-out for facts, with a special investigation of such cases as he might propose to make his *cheval de bataille* at the next district meeting, the process would greatly enrich both him who gave, and those who took, the information. How certain is it that almost every one of us, when looking back on past opportunities, must allow judgment to go by default, confessing to shortcomings in industry and zeal. To us simple workers in the country, the opportunities provided by the Association system should be especially welcome; we have no “*chiel amang us takin' notes*”, and publishing them as a “*mirror of hospital practice*”; we have no class of eager and critical pupils round our beds, compelling us to clearness of diagnosis and precision of speech; we have no regular attendance at the Clinical Society or the Medical and Chirurgical, to dissipate the rust or to save us from routine; our experience must be wrought out and recorded, as so large a portion of our anxious work is done, by *ourselves alone*. This isolation has weighted many an able hand, damped many an aspiring spirit, quenched many a rising star; and well is it for us if we seek and find, in sympathetic co-operation with our brother members, the means of keeping our little lamps alight. Again, our functions occupy certain departments, and spread themselves over particular fields, which, but for our efforts, might go altogether unreaped. Many an endemic will disclose to us phenomena not known within the metropolitan area, and no medical biology can be complete that excludes the study of life “*conditioned*” in the country. Most of you are, doubtless, family doctors, and enjoy in that way peculiar opportunities—among others, that of tracing the special genesis of disease; your patients are often known from childhood, and in their ailments causes are as familiar to you as effects; each case presents to your neighbourly knowledge coherent evolutions of biologic results, instead of flashing through your consulting room like a pathologic meteor, whose orbit may be estimated by a single evanescent element, but not traced out upon the map of space. Dr. Richardson, in his late suggestive volume on the *Diseases of Modern Life*, opens out a path for usefulness in this direction; he asks how far we can show that two diseases, in the parental constitutions, tend to inflict a third and separate form upon the progeny; how far is it true, for instance, that a syphilitic father and a strumous mother would be specially bound to look for insanity or cancer in their progeny. An odd fact in family

history, though not connected with the miscegenation of disease, occurred in my own practice this year. An otherwise healthy man was beginning to succumb before advancing aneurism of the aortic arch; when gradually made aware of his hopeless state, he besought me one day to communicate with an asylum doctor, under whose care a brother just like himself had that morning died. He stated further that, some years before, the eldest brother had been carried off, after suffering two years from disease outside the heart. The asylum doctor (Dr. Kirkman) kindly made a *post mortem* examination, and reported the existence of a large aneurism at the origin of the innominate. My patient shortly afterwards died of the same—making two certainly, three perhaps, out of four brothers thus carried off. It is in this, the natural history of disease, that so splendid a field is open to country practitioners, while their powers of occupying it advance with the advancing education of each generation. If a full proportion of the men now issuing from the schools join the Association, and work for it, an influential future must be in store. Take the matter of rheumatic fever, so widely discussed of late, and in connection with which a burst of light is probably not far off. We want to know of course, if we can, the precise nature of the blood-change, of which lactic acid is the natural product, and articular inflammation the natural effect; let our betters, learned in organic chemistry, hunt out this; meanwhile, we may with earnest eyes search for and discuss together its clinical alliances, and its practical irregularities. Under what circumstances does it rush fatally on to a temperature of 110 deg., or more? Under what circumstances does it miscarry, and terminate abruptly in a pneumonia or a nephritis, or, through some perversion of the animal chemistry, issue in pyæmia? How often does our treatment (especially the lavish administration of alkalies) divert the natural course, and induce mischievous changes that we can neither interpret nor arrest? The habit of over-classifying diseases tends too much to blind our eyes to their correlations and affinities; we often little think, when tending an anxious case of pneumonia, what a trifle would have caused the exciting chill or drinking bout to issue in rheumatism, or gout, or dysentery instead. It is only of late that attention has been called to pneumonia, as often the sole manifestation of the typhoid poison; a system insusceptible of regular typhoid, but encountering the germs of that disorder, resents the intrusion in the shape of an inflamed lung, setting up a pythogenic pneumonia, as it is very properly called. We know something of modified small-pox, whether that modification be due to previous vaccination or to a sudden merging into purpura; we are learning something of modified forms of typhoid; we shall soon learn to know more about erratic developments of rheumatism, and find out perhaps how to restrain the acidification, or ordinary course of blood-change, within easy limits, without diverting the chemical process into other and destructive channels. None should be better fitted than country doctors, conversant as they are with the life-history of their patients, to follow up this clue; no opportunity is more suitable for its discussion than our district meetings.

2. Let us hasten, however, to another aspect under which the usefulness of our meetings may be contemplated; the influence they exert upon our personal feelings in daily life. It need not be said that they help to maintain an honourable *esprit de corps*; that they constitute and apply a public opinion to which we are happily constrained to submit; that they make a host of practitioners, over a large district, to be brethren instead of strangers; and substitute a feeling of organised fellowship, for one of disorganised indifference. Beside all this, they usefully enable many a man to gauge himself in comparison with others. Some young practitioners are painfully self-distrustful; haunted, in fact, by a constant dread of making blunders, and of failing to do justice to their cases; while in truth they are doing bitter injustice to themselves. It is a great boon to enable such men to perceive that they are on a fair level with their professional brothers; that others meet with doubts, obscurities, and failures, as well as themselves, and contrive to succeed without the possession of any gifts superior to their own. It is most important to make them feel that they are running well abreast in the race, and not, as they nervously imagine, lagging ignominiously behind. A lesson of this sort will sometimes save a worthy fellow from being finally disheartened, and add confidence (which alone had been wanting) to his otherwise ample qualifications. Nor is it less useful for older men, who may be dropping into a *laissez-aller*, or necessitarian frame of mind, to imbibe a little vigour and energy of practice from juniors, fresh it may be from the London or Continental hospitals; not only to acquire the latest *manœuvre* or the newest drug, but to resuscitate that spirit of action and hopefulness which varies inversely with the greyness of our heads. The work of our calling is not only lofty, but infinitely wide, and affords scope for the play of every mental characteristic; the zealous may well be inoculated with discretion, and the cautious may profit by the contagion of zeal.

3. Lastly, gentlemen, our great Association looks towards society also, and acknowledges obligations external to itself. The public has a right to expect not a little at its hands. We impress with a stamp of genuineness, and in some sense guarantee, every new member admitted to our ranks, and are bound to be cautious in exercising that function. Not long ago an effort was well and wisely made by our Council, to discourage the excessive advertising of medical books in the daily papers; there is reason to hope that public taste, as well as professional dignity, has been benefited thereby. Ethical committees are not uncommon within our ranks; and it is pleasant to note how very little is heard of their operations.

In the matter of medical titles—doctor, physician, and so forth—it would be highly expedient for the Association, by a committee or otherwise, to think out and express definite conclusions; urging them upon the different licensing bodies, upon the public, and upon its own members. The difficulty of course would be, that no such committee would ever agree within itself, and would possess no power to enforce its decisions. Vivisection is but indirectly within our province; we glory in being, above all things, practitioners; and what physiologic researches we may be conscious of at all, are matters of memory with most of us. Still, of course, crises in public opinion may easily arise when a voice from our ranks would usefully repress the exaggeration of well meaning critics, vindicating such procedures as are essential to the progress of our art, while reprobating any approach to useless cruelty. Though not experimental physiologists ourselves, we value, and profit by, the labour of those who are; let us yield them in return a cordial support; well knowing that the interests of humanity are precious in their sight, and that, to their cultivated instincts, barbarity is more repugnant than ignorance itself. You will, I am sure, readily adopt a petition now lying on the table for giving effect to these opinions.

Happily, the Vaccination and Contagious Diseases Acts are not likely to require our support; the former has nothing to contend with but the harmless abuse of fanatics, and must prevail by its inherent value and truth; the latter will be tested by time as to its power of accomplishing that repression of disease at which it aims; if, as I entirely believe, it is found capable of largely diminishing the amount of syphilis in the community, no argument will be able, or entitled, to prevail against it.

To a kindred matter, the suppression of other contagious maladies, I ask your brief but very earnest attention. Let me startle you into listening by the question: Is it, or is it not, within the power of the 7,000 members of this Association to effect the extinction of scarlet fever within the next five years? Perhaps, all things considered, it is not. But vast good would follow a combined, determined and continuous attempt. In and around Maidstone, vigorous efforts are being made to stamp it out, by the dispatch of trained nurses to every known case, who disinfect and haunt each patient till his inoffensiveness is assured. Some years ago it was proposed to establish a fever-hospital in this town; perhaps it is well we failed; householders are more ready to admit nurses to operate than to send their sick away in time of suffering. No doubt both methods, the receiving wards and the household visitation, would be well employed in a populous neighbourhood; but special promise attaches to the system of spreading throughout the country nursing dépôts, containing women specially instructed in the management of contagious outbreaks, whose aid should be at the command of every medical man. This plan has been worked in Edinburgh, and so far with very satisfactory results. Though, from my habits of practice, far less mixed up than my brethren with the treatment of epidemics, I do take the liberty of urging very strongly the obligation that rests upon each one of us to support sanitary authority and sanitary effort in every possible way; to permit no privacy or concealment of fever-cases, unless satisfied that the most effective methods of limitation are being administered, and to believe that success can only be relied on when the necessary measures are carried out by practised hands, always on the spot, prepared to watch not only the sick room, but every thing and every body that enters, leaves, or goes round about it. Is it too visionary to hope that scarlet fever, that insidious plague which has rent so many of our own hearts, may within a generation become as small-pox, or even less abundant. Pardon me for flinging so important a subject abruptly on the table, with little or nothing of detail; not much detail is needed; I speak as unto wise men, judge ye what I say.

Of course, all our corporate usefulness will depend on our being associated in deed, as well as in name. Are there grounds for suspecting in our own district the least possible apathy as regards meetings, papers, and dinners? Or is the same discoverable in other districts of the Branch? If so, away with it at once. Our numbers increase, our finances flourish, our opportunities multiply; let our energies and self-devotion never be found wanting.