AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED AT THE OPENING OF

THE SECTION OF MEDICINE.

*At the Annual Meeting of the British Medical Association,
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It is but very recently that I have understood that the address of the President, and those on Medicine and on Surgery, do not quite supersede the necessity for addresses from the President of Sections. But, however much they may have done so, I could not open the Section of Medicine without attempting to express my full conviction of the great honour that has been conferred upon me by selecting me to fulfil the important duties of the honourable post of President of the Section, and to express the high satisfaction which I feel in having associated with me as officers gentlemen of such high standing in their profession that, however inadequate I may be to perform properly the duties of President, the working of the Section is amply secured by their being associated with me in the performance of the task.

The list of papers we have to go through is highly satisfactory, and shows that the attention of the authors is taking a direction to secure permanent improvement in the study and practice of our art—a most desirable attainment, only to be secured by our observations being bounded by a correct knowledge of the sciences of Anatomy, Physiology, and Pathology. Those who are content to go on without a thoroughly practical knowledge of these sciences, must remain in the state of fifty years ago, when Dr. John Mason Good wrote his highly classical and elegant work, which gave an admirable account of all known up to that day, and now is a most desirable book of reference. But the only true progress in medicine is made by improving our knowledge both of the anatomy and healthy functions of the organs, and of their morbid anatomy and the corresponding derangements of their functions. What astounding starts have been made in all instances in the diseases of an organ from its anatomy having been correctly demonstrated, has been in all instances illustrated. The discoveries of the anatomy of the liver and of that of the kidney were followed at once by clear descriptions of the changes produced in them by disease; and the names associated with these discoveries are dear to us as physicians who have worked successfully in the amelioration of the health and comfort of their species. The great work of Corvisart admirably demonstrated to us the existence of the morbid changes which took place in the heart; but it remained for the school of more modern days to do away with the rigorous and lamentable epigram or motto—

“*Hæret lateri lethalis arundo.*”

The knowledge of the anatomy, physiology, and morbid anatomy of the changes which take place at the onset of diseases of the heart, has put us in a position for treating them with success, and the older cases satisfactorily. Bouillaud wrote in 1830: “*Aujourd'hui les maladies du cœur sont du nombre de celles dont l'histoire laisse moins à désirer*”; but this is much more true in 1872.

Numerous are the illustrations of the progress of medicine which may be said to have been well dilated on in the admirable Addresses on Medicine which have been given at late meetings of our Association, and in none more than in the highly practical one to which we have listened. The writings of modern days are wonderfully illustrative of the same progress; and I am sure that I shall be excused if I say that, to secure any certainty in our observations, we must never consider ourselves too old to study anatomy and physiology. And I think that the journal published by Dr. Humphry and Dr. Turner gives us a convenient and an ample supply of material to keep us up to those subjects. Let our studies be honest, and the ephemeral delusions of the day need never enter into our consideration, but as examples of the imperfection of knowledge.

It is not my wish to detain you with any comments upon our position; but I would just wish to say that the applications of the present day—the ophthalmoscopes, the endoscopes, the sphygmographs, the thermoscopes—are valuable aids to our senses in a like manner to the stethoscopes, for their immediate objects of investigation, and they augment the efficiency of the power of our senses in the investigation of the functions, as the microscope aids us in the investigation of the organisations.

I will terminate at once, and begin the business of the Section; but

allow me first to say, that it is the wish of the President and of all of us to make this visit of the Association useful and pleasant, in which the professional men of Birmingham are zealous and unanimous. I think Birmingham is an example of unanimity in this respect.

THE MODERN TREATMENT OF THE ADVANCED STAGES OF CONSTITUTIONAL SYPHILIS.*

By WILLIAM ACTON, F.R.C.S.

THE presence to-day at Birmingham of my distinguished master, M. Ricord, has induced me to write a paper on a subject which has occupied more of his attention than that of any other European surgeon. It may not, however, be known to many of those who must have listened to the brilliant lectures of the French professor under the lime trees at the Hôpital du Midi, that he has ceased for some years to publish any of his opinions; and it is only by letter, or the international interchange of private patients, that even old pupils are acquainted with his present views. If, then, I can induce my distinguished friend to state his opinions on the important question of the treatment of syphilis, I think I shall have “done the State some service”. Who is there but has often wished to know the matured opinions of our distinguished countryman, Harvey, on Generation? Would not every practical surgeon set great value on the opinions of John Hunter, if we could have possessed that author's remarks thirty years after his great work on the Venereal Disease had been published, canvassed, and tested, in all parts of the world, as has been the case with the investigations of my learned friend who has come to visit us to-day?

On what constitutes the virus of syphilis, I fear we know little more at present than we did thirty years ago. Experience, however, has corroborated M. Ricord's observations, that relapses of constitutional syphilis are not uncommon even after long periods of apparently perfect convalescence. These accessions of disease we may attribute sometimes to neglect of treatment; but we must admit, likewise, peculiarities of constitution and temperament as bearing on the tendency, which, in spite of the best regulated treatment, will be followed by relapses. In other instances it is noticed that any general disease which will debilitate the system may be followed by an attack of constitutional syphilis, which without such debilitating cause would never have occurred. The old theories about the influence of *ferments* seems to be borne out by some of these exceptional cases.

Practitioners, however, will agree with me that, in the present day, in some of these rebellious cases patients and medical men both lose confidence in remedies, and there are those among us who, after seeing such relapses, doubt if it be the effects of syphilis or mercury which we have to treat in these advanced cases.

The treatment should consist in ameliorating the symptoms, commencing with those that are most urgent. We should attempt to improve the broken-down constitution, too often found in these instances; if mercury have been given, we must leave it off till the constitution has somewhat recovered. Our object should be to place the patient in the best possible condition as regards air, diet, and freedom from anxiety, and, if possible, to give him confidence that the disease is curable, for the moral and mental depression to which the patients are reduced is often very painful to witness.

This being done, I commence with tonics and iodide of iron. If there be ulcers, I treat them with the ointment of nitric oxide of mercury. If the throat and voice be affected, topical applications must be used. If osseous or periosteal tumours exist, iodine or blisters should be applied to reduce the size of the swellings and prevent disfigurement, or pressure on the brain or spinal cord. This local and general treatment will act almost as by a charm in relieving sleeplessness and pain in the bones and joints.

In the commencement, notwithstanding that iodine may have been taken (according to the statement of the patient) without previous benefit, I commence the syrup of iodide of iron in bitter infusion, taken at meal-time in moderate doses. As long as the remedy tells on the constitution, I adhere to moderate doses; but as soon as convalescence tarries or progress is not made, I increase the dose even to two drachms three times a-day. When the system becomes tolerant of these doses, I change the syrup for the iodide of potassium in solution, beginning with ten or fifteen grain doses, taken at meals and dissolved in large quantities of fluid.

* Read before the Surgical Section at the Annual Meeting of the British Medical Association in Birmingham, August 1872.