INAUGURAL ADDRESS

ON THE

PROGRESS OF MEDICINE BY CLINICAL RESEARCH.

Delivered at the Clinical Society of London.

BY

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GENTLEMEN,—I am very sensible of the great honour you have done me in electing me the first President of the Clinical Society. Reluctant as I not unnaturally am to assume, 'at my time of life, any fresh duties or obligations, I yet must confess that I have extreme satisfaction and pleasure in accepting at your hands this new office; for the Society which we are founding to-night seems to me well calculated gradually to bring about that which, in my judgment, is the thing most needful at present among us,—I mean, more exactness of knowledge, and therefore more direct and intelligent purpose, and more successful aim in what is really the end and object of all our labours—the application of remedies for the cure or relief of disease. Certainly, the greatest gap in the science of medicine is to be found in its final and supreme stage—the stage of therapeutics. The anatomy of the human body is sufficiently well known. Its material pathology, also, under the auspices especially of a sister society, has been, I will not say completely, yet very amply and fruitfully ransacked by the diligent scrutiny and study of the dismal, but instructive revelations of the dead-house. I say its *material pathology*; for the condition of doctrinal pathology must necessarily partake of whatever imperfection may be found in the correlative science of physiology. Again, we have attained to a great degree of certainty in the detection and discrimination of disease in the living body. We know tolerably well *what* it is that we have to deal with; but we do not know so well—nor any thing like so well—*how* to deal with it. This is more true, no doubt, in the province of the physician than in that of the surgeon; but it is lamentably true in both provinces. We want to learn distinctly and clearly what is the action of drugs and of other outward influences upon the bodily organs and functions; for every one, now-a-days, I imagine, acknowledges that it is only by controlling or directing the natural forces of the body that we can reasonably hope to govern or guide its diseased actions. To me it has been a life-long wonder, how vaguely, how ignorantly, how rashly, drugs are often prescribed. We try this; and, not succeeding, we try that; and, baffled again, we try something else; and it is fortunate if we do no harm in these our tryings. Now this random and hap-hazard practice, whenever and by whomsoever adopted, is both dangerous in itself, and discreditable to medicine as a science. Our profession is continually fluctuating on a sea of doubts about questions of the gravest importance. Of this the evidence is plentiful and constant. Let me substantiate what I am now saying by one or two glaring instances. Within our own time the old—and, as might have been hoped, obsolete—controversy between the Callenian and Brunonian schools, has been revived in all its former extravagance. Many who are here to-night can recollect the period when blood-letting was reckoned the *summum remedium* against, at least, all forms, or most forms, of inflammatory disorder; which was to be starved out also by the strict enforcement of what was called the antiphlogistic regimen. Now, there are many, I believe, who yet hold that to deprive a patient of an ounce of his blood is to sap his strength and to aggravate his danger; and that, for all ailments, brandy is the grand and easy panacea. One generation extolled mercury as the sole and unfailing remedy for syphilis; the next attributes all the worst evils of that hateful disorder to the very mineral which had been administered for its cure. Even now, at this present time, a hot contention, of most weighty import, fills the air around us upon the question whether, when cholera is present in the

community, we should treat the diarrhoea, presumed to be the prelude or the commencement of cholera, by opium and astringents, to check the discharges from the bowels, or by castor oil to promote them.

I say this uncertainty, this unseemly variation and instability of opinions, is a standing reproach to the calling we profess. It has shaken the faith of many men, of men both able and thoughtful, and driven them to ask themselves whether any kind of medication, other than the *vis medicatrix nature*, is of any real efficacy or value. Well! this is one of the questions which it will be competent for the Clinical Society to settle.

In order to clear the ground for correct observation, and in order to the avoidance of fallacies in observing, it is most desirable, when it can be done without harm or known hazard to the sick, to learn, respecting all distinct and recognised forms of disease, what would be their course, what their tendencies, what their results, if left to themselves, and submitted to no kind of remedial treatment whatever; to ascertain, in a word, what it has become the fashion to speak of as the natural history of disease. For this purpose, again, the Clinical Society may be expected to furnish help.

Truly, there are diseases in which it seems to be our main business to stand by and look on, to see that nature has fair play, that the patient has the requisite advantages of rest and warmth, and pure air, and proper food, and no more; to watch his recovery, not to attempt his cure. Probably all the specific fevers, that run a definite course, are of this kind. Medicine needs to step in only to redress some untoward deviation from that regular course, or to facilitate and fortify the natural recuperative efforts. But there are innumerable other disorders for which rest and warmth, and a pure atmosphere, and a well-adjusted diet, are *not* sufficient. There *are* cures, as well as recoveries, and there are remedies that are equal to the cure. Still, of therapeutics as a trustworthy science, it is certain that we have, as yet, only the expectation. The influence of drugs upon the bodily conditions of health and disease is indeed most real, and most precious to us; and some of them we have learned, in our contests with disease, to wield with much confidence and success. Who can doubt the efficacy of opium, and of anæsthetic vapours, in blunting the sensibilities of the body, and so quelling pain? No one questions the marvellous power of quinine to stop malarious fevers, and other periodic complaints, or of the iodide of potassium to eliminate from the body, apparently by first dissolving them, certain poisonous or hurtful elements. The rough yet sanative effects of emetic and purgative drugs are notorious to all. But there is a host of other known or reputed remedial substances—to say nothing of a further host no doubt, hitherto unthought of and un essayed—about which our practical knowledge is very loose, imperfect, and even misleading. Concerning the peculiar virtue and specific agency of each and all of these, present and to come, we want sound and multiplied experience. There is no other way. The required knowledge must needs be gathered empirically, and by many hands. And as there are many drugs and medicaments yet unproven, so there are also many shapes of disease of which the true nature and origin are still disputed or doubtful. Of all these matters will this Clinical Society, if I rightly apprehend its scope and purpose, take cognisance. Full and faithful descriptions, brought before it by competent and accurate observers, of the symptoms, circumstances, and progress of disease in the living body, and of its behaviour under treatment by medicines prescribed with singleness and simplicity, and a definite aim and object, or sometimes, it may be, of its behaviour under no treatment at all; authentic reports of trials with medicinal substances upon the healthy human body; contributions of this order, multiplied in number, compared together, contrasted, sifted, and discussed by a variety of keen and instructed minds—of minds sceptical in the best and true sense of that word—must lead at length, tardily perhaps, but surely, to a better ascertainment of the rules, peradventure to the discovery even of the laws, by which our practice should be guided; and so bring up the therapeutic department of medicine to a nearer level with those other parts which are strictly ministerial and subservient to this. And I think I do not entertain an extravagant expectation of the results of the formation of this Society, when I express my belief that, if wisely and strictly managed, it will hereafter be spoken of as the starting point of a vast and solid improvement in that which is our special office in the world, the scientific and intelligent exercise of the divine art of healing.