Remarks

ON

EXTREMES IN MEDICAL SPECULATION.

BY

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At the present moment, when cholera is subsiding in this country, and we may be expected to take account of the progress that may have been made towards its successful treatment, I will endeavour, not to express any opinion of my own, or to bring forward critical views, but, if possible, to lay down principles which ought to govern our inquiries. And it is expedient to review this aspect of the subject, not only in reference to cholera, but also to disease in general, if I am correct in my supposition that it is neglected to an extent most damaging to medical research.

All physicians embrace this view of therapeutics with a leaning in one of two directions, unless they fortunately take both. One of these is, the making good the remedies adapted to successful treatment, on a presumption that they form groups varying with different cases of disease, in relation to circumstances of season and place and prevailing *temperies aeris*, but with a strong expectation that their inquiry will end in the disclosure of specific remedies. The other method is a more seductive one, admirable indeed when successful; and the energy of hopefulness, which it suggests, certainly has some tendency to ensure its success. He who treads the path which I am now describing, whether as author or reviewer, enters through the same line of investigation as the first described; his remedies are grouped, and, if he can reason at all, he has some reason for each of them; but in the mind with which I am now dealing, often one endowed with conceptions stronger than perceptions, some one remedy occupies a larger share of his confidence than the rest in relation to its apparent claims; the question then ought to be present to his mind, what right the remedy so circumstanced possesses to be considered specific.

These remarks seem obvious, and may be called commonplace. They are not so; they point to a difficulty of immense importance in the inquiry which each physician has to make into the results of practice, both his own and that of others. I am anxious to avoid quoting remedies that have been brought before the public as more or less claiming the character of specifics in cholera, and have become, as such, the subjects of dispute.

In my own mind there rests a strong impression, that scarcely a single remedy has been propounded by wise and considerate men—and large is their number in the profession—which does not deserve a distinct placing and assignment in reference to cases in which it has done good, with cautious avoidance of overpraise. This lesson is, in truth, taught us by the smallness of number of those remedies which time has, in different degrees, constituted as truly specific.

Such are the considerations which enter into an adjustment of the value of the remedies lately found useful in one important disease. But analogy dictates some cautions in regard to principles which lie at the base of our general pathological estimate of treatment, which I think may well find a place here. If we are tempted by a laudable ambition to be easily satisfied that we have found specific remedies, it is not unnatural that we should occasionally maintain principles of practice with undue earnestness and exaggeration through successive epochs. And has not this been the case? Has there not been in the present century a most unphilosophical precipitancy in the medical rush out of a system of extreme depletion into a system of extreme stimulation? This is, I believe, widely felt by many, who feel also that it shackles the practice of nonconformists, and damages the practice of those who embrace the reigning excess. I believe it is also felt that the assertion of a change of type in disease does not explain the difficulties in which the rush from one principle of practice to its diametrically opposite involves our character as a scientific body. I have lived through one of the periods alluded to, and have witnessed its antagonist period; and I am strongly tempted to believe that, when the next change on this subject takes place, physicians will find it difficult to recover those *nuances* and shades of distinction, through which the sthenic and asthenic forms of disease were once distinguished by those out of the herd of *heroic* practitioners who recognised with any logical tact appropriate cases for the use of the lancet.

THE CATTLE-PLAGUE. The *London Gazette* contains an order in Council directing the Archbishop of Canterbury to issue a form of public thanksgiving for the cessation of the cattle-plague and the abatement of the cholera, to be used on November 18th.

STATUE OF SIR HENRY MARSH. On Friday week, the ceremony of presenting the statue of the late Sir Henry Marsh to the King and Queen's College of Physicians in Ireland, took place in the grand hall of the institution before a numerous and distinguished assembly. The President, Dr. Stokes, occupied the chair. Dr. Banks, in an appropriate address, presented the statue on the part of the subscribers, the President of the College signifying its acceptance in suitable terms. The statue is the work of Mr. Foley, and in its execution he seems to have eclipsed all his previous efforts. It is placed in the hall of the College, in which it forms a very attractive feature. The statue has been purchased by subscription, and has been presented by the body of subscribers to the King and Queen's College in Dublin, with which Sir Henry Marsh had been intimately connected during a great portion of his lifetime. The statue when unveiled formally was seen to be of life size. The figure appears in academic costume, and the likeness is excellent, the attitude being suitable and graceful, the only want being that which the art of the sculptor cannot supply—the brilliant eye, so well remembered as a feature of the living man. The occasion was rendered as imposing as it was interesting by the presence, in their robes, of the President of the College, Dr. Stokes, and the Fellows, nearly all the eminent medical men of Dublin being present to do honour to the memory of the physician commemorated. The body of the hall was crowded by members of the profession resident in Dublin and various parts of Ireland.