

# General Remarks

ON THE  
PRACTICE OF MEDICINE.

BY  
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## I.

*The Practice of Medicine prior to the Knowledge of Disease. What it was. Knowledge of Disease improved it, while it preserved its original outline. What Practice owes to Pathology not exactly calculable. Distinction between Curing the Disease and Treating the Patient.*

THERE was a practice of medicine long before there was any knowledge of disease. The griefs, pains, and necessities of man's body and mind did not call the less loudly for relief because they were not understood. The practice of medicine was always a daily need, and always brought with it a certain measure of benefit. It seems providentially ordered, that what is for our good should not altogether wait attendance upon our knowledge.

But this practice of medicine, which was prior to the knowledge of disease, and so far uninstructed, was not always without reason and method. It had two ways of proceeding. 1. It dealt largely in *specifics* (special remedies). It did cures by remedies, which had (as was thought) the direct power of curing, and which seemed to reach the disease in its essence, and abolish it without any intermediate or cognisable operation whatever. Thus it had a reputed remedy for almost every disease which had a name. 2. This uninstructed practice, when it had no name to give the disease, and had no remedy for curing it, was not without resource, if, notwithstanding, a great illness were obviously suffered. It took note of heat and cold, and hunger and thirst and pain, and of conscious weakness and incapacity, and of some more obvious varieties of the pulse. And to these, and to whatever else went plainly and discernibly wrong in those feelings and functions and movements, by which the body makes chief display of its vitality, it tried to minister as it could; and it often ministered well and successfully. For thus it often hit unconsciously upon right indications of treatment, and thus procured recovery from a disease, of which it knew neither the nature, the seat, or the existence.

Here we have a sort of primitive plan of medical practice; and the same remains to this day. Knowledge of disease and a more cultivated experience have added much and corrected much. But it has preserved its original outline.

If any man, a little accustomed to self-questioning, will call to mind what he was at first as a physician, and what by increase of knowledge and experience he afterwards became, he will find not unfaithfully reflected in his own example the beginning and progress of the art itself.

As the knowledge of disease increased, the practice of medicine improved; but neither proportionally nor with equal steps. Many diseases which we

knew the best, we did not therefore manage the better; often, indeed, not better than in the time of our ignorance; because a fatal part of our knowledge was simply this, that the diseases, in their own nature, were beyond the possible reach of any remedy.

Nevertheless, to affirm that the more we have known of diseases, the better we have been able to manage them, would be quite true in the general sense; but to give an exact account of the debt due from practice to pathology would be hardly possible. We could not take our knowledge of diseases as it is at this day, and assort it, and weigh it, and put a value upon it according to the help it affords us in practice. In some diseases, its help is very great; in some, it is very little; and in some, it absolutely amounts to nothing at all. In some, it is plain, appreciable, and at hand; in some, uncertain, equivocal, and remote. Here we want more knowledge; there we have already more knowledge than we can use. Here we are in the dark; there we have plenty of light, but we cannot contrive to throw the light we have upon the objects which require it. The misfortune is, that practical medicine has from time to time been darkened, as it were, by cross lights, let in from strange quarters. They have set off the subject; they have made a show of it; but they have given it lustre, rather than illustration.

If any one, who had a turn for the thing, would spend half his life in carefully surveying the various sorts of knowledge deemed needful to make a good physician, and take, as it were, their natural bearings, and at last reckon how far, in fact, they had or had not fulfilled their aim, he would produce (supposing him to have acquitted himself of his task tolerably well) an interesting, a very curious, and an utterly useless exertion. To speak of practical medicine and the things concerning it profitably, a man must draw either from what is his own entirely, or from what he has made his own by experiment and trial. Whether he handle particulars merely, or embrace general facts and principles, he must make himself the representative of the art he practises.

When first I found myself in the midst of between four and five hundred patients in St. Bartholomew's Hospital, the scene bewildered me, and I learnt nothing for months. It was something, however, to become reconciled to the objects around me, and to look with complacency on what was going on. All I saw was "a great multitude of impotent folk", and the physicians busy among them with the expedients of their art. And some were recovering, and some dying; some getting better, and some worse, and some remaining unalterably the same. The physicians and their art confronted the patients and their diseases, and exercised, I plainly perceived, a great power upon the whole. But I could not yet discern their points of contact. It was as if some mysterious scroll were being daily unrolled before my eyes; and all its inscriptions were unintelligible, for want of the key for deciphering them.

At length this small ray of truth found me out in the dark; viz., that some medicines were remedial simply by bringing diseases to an end without any intermediate operation being apparent, or intended, or thought of; and that some were re-

medial by bringing diseases indeed to an end, but not without intermediate operations, both apparent and designed, and looked for as conditional to the result. This little light gave me heart and encouragement, and a new interest. Not that by help of it I was able to penetrate the *modus operandi* of medicines in the least degree, but I could just read by it that they had, or seemed to have, at least two several ways of working out their ends, and that physicians had two distinct purposes in prescribing them. To me, as yet an uninformed looker-on, the practice of medicine first presented itself taking this outline; it was its natural outline; and it has remained distinct and permanent and the same in my mind ever since. Whatever I have since learnt has taken its shape from it, and its place within it; and so will what I have now to say.

It would save some trouble, and not, I trust, shew me bent upon handling the subject too artificially, and so spoiling it, if of these two modes of dealing with disease remedially, I called the one their *cure*, and the other their *treatment*. According to popular notion, cure is the aim and end of all treatment, and the result and complement of successful treatment. But let cure and treatment now be taken to denote different things, so far as the aims and objects of the physician are concerned in his management of disease. Let cure be looked upon as concerned with the disease as such, and having little or no regard to the individual patient whom it befalls. Treatment is concerned with the individual patient, and leaves his disease to take care of itself.

There are eminent and familiar instances of cure in this sense: the cure of ague by bark and arsenic; of scabies by sulphur; of syphilis by mercury; of scurvy by lemon-juice; and of certain periosteal diseases by iodide of potassium. And small-pox, measles, scarlatina, the typhus and typhoid maladies, are eminent instances of diseases which have no cure, and yet issue in recovery and health by means of treatment.

It is an instructive fact that, as the knowledge of disease has increased, the practice of medicine has been less and less conversant with cures and more and more conversant with treatment. The knowledge of disease is not naturally suggestive of special remedies, which are always hit upon by chance; it rather goes to reducing the number of the old ones. From its habit of inquiry, it is ever trying the claims of certain remedies to the credit of *curing* certain diseases; and is ever finding good reason to disallow such claims and reject such remedies largely. Hence, practice has betaken itself of necessity to manage many diseases by *treatment*, which were once deemed within easy reach of cure. And thus the present state of our knowledge has come to warrant the conclusion that the number of diseases is very small which are capable of cure by a proper remedy of their own, and which exclude the need of other remedies addressed to conditions belonging to the individual patients; whereas the number in which the converse obtains would embrace the vast majority of human maladies.

But this cure of diseases by single special remedies is a thing so complete and offhand, so saving of thought and trouble, and so accordant with the popular notion how diseases are, or ought to be, dealt with, that one cannot help some regret for the number in this happy predicament being small. Did

it include all or almost all diseases, it would go near to produce unanimity among physicians, for there would be nothing for them to disagree about; and at the same time to banish all thought from them in practice, for there would be nothing for them to think about. Nevertheless, we should greatly rise in the opinion of the world, which, even with things as they are, is ready to magnify none so highly as those who, whether deceiving or self-deceived, have a cure for any or for all diseases.

Cure by special remedies addressed to the disease, and treatment by common remedies addressed to present indications in the man, divide the domain of practical medicine between them; unequally indeed, but still they divide it. Moreover, they mix themselves a good deal together; cure and treatment running into each other, and special and common remedies cooperating for good.

Let it, however, be remarked that practical medicine takes this shape from its own necessity, and things are. Our knowledge is incomplete. But such as it is, we must use it; and the first condition of using it safely or profitably is to know that it is complete. An imperfect instrument is in our hands, and we cannot trust it simply and entirely. It needs some art and management in the handling; but these must not be too much, lest they hurt the play of our instrument, imperfect as it is.

## Addresses and Papers

READ AT

THE TWENTY-NINTH ANNUAL MEETING  
OF THE BRITISH MEDICAL  
ASSOCIATION.

[Held in CANTERBURY, JULY 23rd, 24th, and 25th, 1861.]

### CLUB-PRACTICE.

By A. B. STEELE, Esq., Liverpool.

THE subject that I have to bring before you will at once be understood by the term of club-practice; it is a question which concerns a large number of the members of our Association. I can speak with certainty with regard to my own locality, the manufacturing districts of Lancashire; and I will take the town of Liverpool as a specimen. There a very considerable proportion of the medical profession—quite nine out of ten, or nineteen out of twenty—at some period or other of their professional career are more or less connected with club-practice. The subject is also one of considerable importance to the community at large, because it is the means, and the only means, of affording to that very large and important section of the population sometimes called the working classes—by which I mean the operatives—not only the power of obtaining relief during temporary illness, but of procuring them skilled medical attendance without intruding upon the funds of the medical charities, or on the parochial rates; thereby encouraging that feeling of independence among the working classes the growth of which it is so desirable to foster and promote. In order to give you some idea of the magnitude of the system, I may say that Mr. Tidd Pratt states that there are in this country, within his knowledge, besides many that he knows nothing of, nine millions of members of benefit societies, and probably the number is much higher; and that at least one million of money—very likely it is much