ON MEDICAL OBSERVATION.

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THE familiar word used as the heading for the following remarks, has a fuller and more complete substantive meaning, than is assigned to it in ordinary acceptation; for it signifies not merely a looking-at, or noting—a note, or remark, but a watching diligently and curiously with the eyes of the mind and body (*oculis mentis et corporis servo*), a marking and weighing. In this latter and more comprehensive sense, it is here employed. It will not, surely, be held presumptuous to assert, that the distinction pointed out is not always regarded.

Our profession's true objects, and the successful administration of remedies, are so dependent upon the due exercise of observation, that little, it may be supposed, need be said to establish its importance in the medical man's career; and yet, though such supposition be ever so generally entertained, very slight consideration will shew how frequently the belief it implies, is *not* acted on. From earliest medical instruction, we are taught not only to listen attentively to the patient's own, or his friends' uncertain and often erroneous history of his ailments, but to weigh and consider for ourselves each connecting circumstance, to scrutinize the condition of each organ, sense, and faculty, the heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, intestines, the tongue, the eyes, the skin, the voice, speech, perception, judgment, intelligence, etc., and from a close and busy, though silent observation of these, their functions, secretions, powers, and operations, to arrive at well-drawn conclusions whereby to pursue and regulate the treatment we adopt. Peaceful may that man's breast be, who can always reflect on having diligently thus performed his duty to his fellow-man, although in vain.

Many causes interfere with, or are allowed to hinder the exercise of, observation. The medical student, by his position as such, is, in too many instances, careless of the instructions given in the class-rooms, trusting to get all up in time for his *examination*; and if he thinks, beyond the hour of their being addressed to him, of those more particularly alluded to, he does so, as of something connected with the future, when he shall be in practice for himself, but with which at present, when bothered with so many things, and *only* attending dispensary patients, he need not trouble himself. In this way, habit, which so rules us all, is imbibed in one of its objectionable forms—that of slurring over an essential duty, of avoiding the trouble of thought and reflection, by selecting for treatment some prominent sign or symptom, instead of the diseased condition it indicates, and without any reference to its anatomical relations, its physiological dependence, or pathological tendencies—of jumping to a conclusion from hastily snatched impressions. Temperament and mental incapacity may go far to produce the same result; and, in either case, the young practitioner will enter upon his duties an empirical symptomatist, a mere routinist, prepared to do as he has seen done in similar cases, but without the wit to discriminate, or to know when or where the supposed similarity fails. Such he may

continue to be through a long life, unless the conviction of his culpable neglect and its disastrous consequences stir up within him a better resolution, and there dawn upon his mind the light of an imperative necessity for inquiry, oral, visual, and mental, and for earnest, deliberate reflection upon all that he has heard, seen, and thought,—for these are the true constituents of observation.

The too prevalent existence of this habit of neglect cannot be denied, while the proneness to its indulgence, even in the most observant, can be detected on a little self-examination. The practitioner may have employed, as it seemed, his best powers of discernment in forming his diagnosis, and in accordance therewith, may have treated disease assiduously on the legitimate principles of his art, through a protracted term, yet without any marked improvement in the condition of the patient. Disappointed, wearied, and annoyed, he at length concludes the case to be anomalous; and either by his own desire, or that of the sick man, or his friends, another is called in consultation, who after examining for himself, and ascertaining the few particulars of treatment, perhaps by a single suggestion, unravels the mystery. The former, internally blaming himself for having suffered so plain a point to escape his notice, becomes conscious of having allowed himself to be misled in giving too great weight to some mere symptom; resolves to watch more closely, and to keep this instance in view on the occurrence of any other resembling it; forgetting that this resolution strongly tends to the maintenance of the very habit it professes a determination to overcome. But the circumstances might have turned out differently; the practitioner called in consultation might himself have been empirical, and have satisfactorily vouched for his respected brother's talents and acuteness; the patient might have lingered and died in the happy confidence of an anomaly, and even if matters were at last made very plain by a *post-mortem* examination, all might have been arranged and conveniently explained.

Such an instance, it may be remarked, shews the benefit which may be obtained from a consultation, in cases of doubt and tedious progress. Not that there lies that infallible resource for the dying, which seems to dwell in the popular imagination, in a formal presence at the bedside, of the "M.D." or "doctor of advice", as he is fancifully termed by the vulgar, apart from all notions of status, acquirements, habits, and experience. But when the mind, embued, perhaps in the outset, with special views not easily to be relinquished or changed, becomes jaded with long watching and ineffectual effort, grows uneasy, doubting, and self-accusing, how gladly it seeks and finds relief in the fresher judgment of some clear, calm, well-trained, and observant intellect, no matter whether of one styled "physician", "surgeon", "general practitioner", or simple "apothecary". There is no special virtue in walls of stone or of brick, nor superiority in the distinctive parchments vended within them, provided only they be honestly dealt out. The man, his mind and intellect, are what the sick have to do with; not his license, neither its source, nor its cost.

But whatsoever the causes which produce neglect of the exercise of observation, we may feel assured, that according to our consciousness of

its importance, (and what man capable of thinking can be ignorant of this ?), so is our responsibility for its neglect. Simply to read the expression of such a sentiment, carries little force, attracts small regard ; for the very dereliction, a censure of which is implied in its terms, precludes its being properly received, or provokes its rejection altogether. Still will the truth remain, however, in the integrity of its momentous import. No mere question of professional etiquette is concerned ; no single act of petty rivalry ; no silly point of precedence, as to grade or status ; no foolish pride, arrogant assumption, nor burning jealousy ; nothing less considerable than the preserving of a life, or of health, entrusted for a time to our care. How greatly may the issue affect the interests of many for the present ; how very greatly those of at least one for the future.

It will be conceded, that most of us are inclined to practise empirically, in greater or less degree ; that is, that when we happily succeed in a marked manner by a particular mode of treatment in one case, we are apt, perhaps from a natural addiction to think well of ourselves and our proceedings, to prescribe, or adopt the same course, during the ascendancy in our estimation of that kind of treatment, in all other cases which can be construed into an analogy. Nor can it have failed to strike any one as wonderful, that there always occur a number of cases about the same time, so very like each other, that we seem to have nothing to do but apply the same remedy. It may indeed be said in explanation, that many affections are dependent on atmospherical and other general influences, and that, therefore, it is exceedingly probable that several similar instances of disease may occur about the same time, nor need it surprise that, in these, the same remedies should be indicated and prove suitable. The reasoning is just, but is applicable only to a certain extent ; for allusion is made not only to epidemic diseases, but to those that are sporadic in every variety, and even comprehends hidden surgical disorders, cancers, strictures, tumours, ulcerations, etc. We thus perhaps avoid a little trouble, and, not unlikely, flatter ourselves with the pleasant conceit that we have hit upon something valuable, in the way of discovery in the symptoms, or in the treatment of a certain class of maladies—a conceit which we reluctantly abjure, only when some palpable example of non-obedience to our fancied specific evinces the danger as well as absurdity of indulging, however slightly, in the whim of a universal medicine. So well-founded is this fact, that it is no unusual thing to remark physicians in extensive practice, who introduce for a period into almost every prescription they write, some favoured item of the *materia medica*, or over-rated pharmaceutical novelty : or to find surgeons setting their professional affections upon the rectumbougie, or the uterine sound, for which, or the like, they, during a season, meet constant occasion.

Special examples of this aptness to empiricize, to the exclusion of any attempt at observation, and consequently to the neglect of the only right means whereby the sick are to be healed, might now be offered ; but these will readily present themselves to recollection in individual experience. There is one, however, appallingly memorable,—like some huge monster, that lately stalked among us in open day, scattering terror

and death, and whose shadow has scarcely yet passed away,—which may be more particularly noticed.

It were idle to detail the so-called remedies recently reputed as curative of cholera. We may better indicate the truth, by asking what remedies were not tried and severally vaunted by their proclaimers as specific, from chloroform and oxygen, back through the range of the *materia medica*, to the Coffinish dose of cayenne and ether, down, down to very quackery, homœopathic and hydropathic, drops, powders, mixtures, and nostrums innumerable? And was there one of the entire catalogue, that deserved the commendations heaped upon it by its patrons, the deceivers, or the duped? Experience solemnly declares, not one! Because cold—an icy-coldness—was present, and diffusible stimuli were known to excite warmth, brandy was “poured” into the stomach; because pains and torturing cramps were suffered, opium was liberally administered; because thirst was urgent, drinks were given in profusion; and because the fluids were largely evacuated, cold water was sent down in gallons to supply their place, but only to be thrown back with a characteristic accession to its quantity. In all this, was there not the very perfection of empiricism? The proportion of deaths in many districts was excessive. Who shall truly say, how many of these were the result of uncontrollable disease, or only the natural consequence of disease uncontrolled, because uncombated, nay, left to run riot among the helpless, defenceless sick, by the non-application of proper remedial means, by their too late application, or by the deceptive administration of mock-cures? These last were everywhere thrust upon the attention of the ignorant by base, life-pandering, quack-druggist compounders, and others, non-medical, but vain and presumptuous, who having *seen* cholera abroad, undertook to cure it, forsooth, at home, with no other qualification for the purpose than the regnant nostrum of a former day.

Even with calomel—the only substance which seemed endowed with some degree of power to check the devastation—the failures were dishearteningly numerous; more so, indeed, than is to be accounted for by the difference of circumstances in various cases, such as lateness in having recourse to the remedy, deteriorated constitution from other diseases, depraved habits, etc. The heavy amount of loss of life in certain districts, as compared with others, suggests serious and painful reflections as to its causes, some of which were, unhappily, palpable enough to the commonest apprehension. But, from the observation of Cholera, whether left to its own course, or combatted by medicines, much was learned of its character and natural history; while by pursuing the same exercise with regard to the various modes of treatment, judicious or injudicious, our knowledge of the disease, though far from being perfected, must have been improved.

In reference to the particular fact which has led to so lengthened a digression, an observation, which was amply verified afterwards, occurred to my mind, and probably may have presented itself to others, although in none of the numerous experiences detailed, or theories propounded, which have come under my notice, has it been alluded to. It was the very marked distinction in the issue, between patients in cholera, who

were of a calm, firm, enduring temperament, or who had courage to bear, with martyr-like patience, the tortures of parching thirst and agonizing cramps, the sensations of a leaden apathy, slowly, surely, stealing "upward and upward", the terrible sense of semi-death—and those of an excitable, restless, and irritable habit, who obstinately disregarded all entreaties to keep perfectly still; who, with the most earnest warnings of certain dissolution as the consequence, reiterated in their ears, would yet heave and toss themselves about, on every racking impulse of pain, to the utmost of their power. This is not the place to give cases in illustration, but they were numerous; the former, in many instances, recovered; the latter, never—though, to all seeming, both had the disease in equal degree of severity, and both were treated alike. So surely did the distinction appear, that the result, favourable or fatal, could with general exactness be prognosticated. Is there not something here for physiological and pathological consideration?

Observation constitutes the most valuable attribute of the medical practitioner; it is at once the calm investigator and the eager promoter of *Science*. It forms the essential means by which experience is rendered profitable; the unfailing source whence come knowledge, wisdom, and professional skill; the element, as it were, which sustains, aye, and sometimes raises to dazzling intensity, the steady flame of the discoverer's lamp; but also, it is his strongest, his paramount duty. How grave the consideration, that, through its neglect, human life may have been lost! And who is there among us that, looking back upon his arduous course, knows no cause of regret, and truly feels that he himself is not chargeable with some instance of neglect of observation? The circulation, vaccination, the diastaltic nervous system, the application of the stethoscope, the special uses of ergot, of quinine, of iodine, and cod-liver oil—each important discovery, or just adaptation of remedial means, has been the product of persistent and untiring observation. Great, then, is the stimulus thus presented to intellectual exertion, in every professional relation in which we may be placed, to acquit ourselves worthily in our difficult and responsible vocation.

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