

**ANNUAL ADDRESS delivered before the Medical Society of the State of New-York, Feb. 6, 1839, by LAURENS HULL, M. D., President of the Society.**

GENTLEMEN,

Called to preside over this society, I do not forget, that I am more indebted to your partiality than to my own deserts, for this distinguished honor. This station has been filled by men wiser, and better than myself, and while I am very willing to acknowledge their claims to superior wisdom and experience; I hope that I may claim for myself, and it is all that I shall ask, the character which I trust is common to us *all*, viz: devotion to the interests of the profession, and a jealous regard for its respectability. To this we are bound as much by the laws of conscience, as of professional duty; and since from the very nature of our profession, it is more exposed to the inroads of imposture and ignorance than any other, we are bound with unceasing diligence, to endeavor to prevent the spread of the popular delusions which threaten to destroy all the distinctions between virtue and vice, ignorance and intelligence, ingenuousness and cunning, and to aim at those qualifications which mark, and indeed form the character of the high minded, the learned, and the moral physician.

As it is usual on occasions of our meeting for the presiding officer to address you on some subject connected without professional duty, or medical practice, I have thought proper to call your attention to a matter, which, although it has been frequently canvassed, remains at this day as destitute of remedy as if none had ever been suggested. You will readily anticipate me, I mean the subject of quackery. It would seem almost superfluous at this day, to call up and discuss what has been long known as the opprobrium of our profession.

It is scarcely possible to present a remedy for the evil, if we are to form our judgment from the experience of former years; but still there is some hope that the curse will not be perpetual, if we can direct our efforts to the extirpation of its root, in place of depending upon any legal enactments to prevent its growth. I have very little confidence in the efficiency of penal statutes, they have been tried till the conviction has been forced upon us that all such experiments must fail. The prejudices of the public are always on the side of feeling, and never on the side of reason, and the cry of persecution in favor of a felon will do more to aid his escape through mistaken sympathy, than justice can to insure his punishment. I am sorry for the necessity of making this remark, it seems too severe to be true, nor would it be believed if the records of our criminal courts did not bear ample testimony to it, more especially in cases of indictment for malpractice in medicine, and of ignorant medical homicides.

The various forms which quackery assumes, are limited only by the varied features of character in society, as it presents itself in all large communities; no description of persons are exempt from its influence. The fool and the philosopher, the ignorant and the educated, the credulous and the sceptical, are alike the dupes to some besetting weakness,

which makes them fit subjects for the exercise of imposture; nothing more being necessary, than the knowledge of character to detect the weak point of the assault. In some cases it is expedient to make a parade of learning, in others to affect to despise it – in some to address the fears, in others the hopes ; in some the interests, and in others the vanity of those whom it would influence; and thus we have quackery in all its gradations, from the pompous exhibition of a folio of nonsense in the form of a new theory which few can read and none can understand, down to the simple assertion of a falsehood, manufactured to sell a pill, a potion, or a plaster to raise a dollar, reckless of the consequences to health, life, or happiness. I do not pretend to know the extent to which medical imposture has arrived in other countries, having never had the opportunity of travel, but if we may form a judgment from its prevalence here, its ravages must be incalculable: like a pestilence it manufactures the subjects on whom it preys, and no experience will teach them, till too late to be of service. The miserable victims of the delusion are led step by step to their graves without the moral strength to inquire into the pretensions of the imposture, or the good sense to balance the evidences which their own condition presents. It is only necessary to refer to a few of the absurd theories with which the public are amused and cheated, in order to shew the truth of the above remarks. Every man knows that sweating is a function of the human system essential to health, and most men know that the suspension of this discharge from the skin is speedily followed by symptoms which leave no doubt of existing disease, and upon this single fact it is attempted to build an entire system of curative medicine.

This monstrous absurdity is the *Thompsonian* practice. Sweating is the end to be obtained; and so far as we are enabled to judge from testimony, adduced on the trials for homicide, of some of those sweating agents, it is the only end to which all their violent remedies are directed; emetics of the most violent and dangerous nature are exhibited as auxiliary to this object, and the exhaustion consequent on their operation, is attempted to be controlled by stimuli as acrid and as violent as the medicine which produced it. Lobelia and cayenne pepper in pills, powders and infusions – hot baths, hot bricks and blankets make up the sum of the treatment of the ill fated patient, and this too in every variety of disease. It would seem impossible that these assertions could be true were it not *that* evidence, which we are bound to believe, because given in a court of justice fully justifies them.<sup>1</sup> While one set of impostors are amusing the sick and cheating them out of life, for the paltry fee of a few dollars by the process of *sweating*, another with about the same amount of honesty and intelligence are practising upon their credulity, by the silly dogma that purging is the only remedy for disease, and that it will not only cure, but prevent all the ills that flesh is heir to; so that between the anxiety to be relieved from disease on the one hand, and the fears of contracting it on the other, the poor deluded customer is drugged to death, and all for the profits arising from the sale of pills at 25 cents per box! The reasons by which this imposture is attempted to be supported, one would suppose to be too absurd to deceive the most simple; but as all these deceits must have something

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<sup>1</sup> Vide the case of the people versus Frost for homicide of a person by the name of French, tried at the New-York Sessions before R. Riker, Recorder.

like a theory to give each of them a chance of being successful, the following may serve as a sample: "Bleeding is always improper in the treatment of any complaint, whether inflammatory or otherwise, because the life of flesh is in the blood, Leviticus xvii. 11. With as much reason might we say, that trees die from too great a quantity of sap as that a man can die from too great a quantity of blood. The moisture derived from the earth by the tree, becomes sap, and the stomach of man from the food put into it, obtains blood which supplies the daily waste of the body. The same causes tend to life in both. But that which causes life never produces death. Pain cannot exist but from *corrupt particles* being seated in the identical part where the pain is experienced. These corrupt particles when in great volume (quantity) are the *positive cause of death*. It is a solemn truth that corruption terminates the existence of all created beings; the importance of its speedy removal from the body when by any cause it has accumulated, is therefore self evident; not only *health* but *existence* being absolutely endangered by its presence.

Let us then acknowledge that the only sure means of preventing and curing disease, is the speedy removal of *corrupt humors* from the body. Disease being only another name for *corruption*, and *corruption*, or *corrupt humors* being identified in all cases as impurity of blood.

*Purgative medicine*, when resorted to in season, that is, while there is sufficient vitality remaining in the system, will certainly remove corruption; thus the blood is purified; thus chronic infirmities and premature death are prevented; thus, those whose lives are of the utmost consequence to their country, and families, are often saved.

The importance of this discovery of curing diseases, after ages will do justice to. The curative effect depends on the *purgative qualities* of the pills; experience and a continuation of experiments for upwards of forty years, have made them the most judiciously balanced purge known.

Therefore, however long it may be necessary to persevere with them for the removal of any disease, no other than good can possibly result from their use – they are perfectly innocent. The healthy as well as those suffering from disease, should use them: the former to keep their blood pure and vigorous, and the latter to remove all noxious accumulations without weakening the system."

It is hardly possible to embody within the same compass of words, a greater mass of absurdities; and yet, strange as it may appear, multitudes of persons believe all this to be sound philosophy, because they think that they can understand it, whereas the real truth is, that to those who will be at the pains to reason, as they would on any other matter, it is sheer imposture calculated only to deceive the simple. To advertise a nostrum for the cure of any one disease, or its varieties, however disreputable, might have its apology, although a difference, in the circumstances of the patients could not fail to render it a very dangerous remedy; but to insist upon one cause of disease, and therefore only one remedy, is to insult the simplest measure of understanding – for in sober truth the exhibition of medicines is not directed to the causes of disease so much as to disease itself, which is a consequence. Thus for what do physicians prescribe when treating the whole

class of fevers including small pox, scarlet fever and, local inflammations! Can it be the causes? in some this is *contagion*: in others *marsh miasmata*: in some *epidemic influence* which we cannot comprehend with all the aids of the light of science, and, in others, exposures to mere variations of temperature; the proposition therefore is an absurdity. But while one class of medical impostors take advantage of the simplicity of the world, and care not by what means they succeed, provided only that they are successful; there are others who seem to reason, although the foundations of all their arguments lie too deep to be fathomed by ordinary minds. They take for granted certain positions which are utterly destitute of proof, and impossible to prove, and build a *Babel* of incongruous materials till all the language of common sense is totally confounded. Such for instance is the lately imported doctrine of homeopathy, first known in this country, that is if ever known, (which, by the way I do not believe) about fifteen years ago. Its novelty and the apparent method in this fanciful doctrine first gave it some celebrity, arising merely from curiosity; and the utter impossibility of making it intelligible, is perhaps with many visionary men its best recommendation. It depends for its profitable success however more upon the fact that "deferred hope maketh the heart sick" than upon any other cause – persons who have been long sick, and hopelessly diseased, and such as, although they may want a physician, have no need of him, are for the most part the patients.

I regret to speak in terms of reprobation of any thing that has the recommendation of mental effort; but I feel bound to say as my belief, that when the doctrine is practised upon by honest men, they are deluded, and as it regards their patients, they are not only deluded but defrauded. The doctrine, if doctrine it can be called, which requires us to believe that medicines operate beneficially in inverse proportion to their quantities to an infinite degree! that the thing which will cause the disease is the proper remedy to cure it! that the effects of agents, to common sense infinitely divided already, and so far as the eye can detect perfectly dissolved in a given fluid, will have their powers increased to an extraordinary degree by the simple process of agitating on shaking the vessels in which they are contained, and positions of a similar kind, are to say the least of them, a little too extravagant to be implicitly credited, and yet all this is true of Homeopathy. It may indeed with great truth be said, that the proper patients of such physicians, are those who can believe such dogmas. It would be a waste of your time to extend my remarks further on this subject, it revolts the sense, and the few facts on which it is made to rest, are not fully stated and therefore deceptive.

It would be much more consistent with reason; and infinitely more honest, to leave disease to expend its force, without any interference, and permit patients to follow their instincts as do the brutes in a state of nature.

The serious medical observer who sees to what an immeasurable extent poor human nature is imposed upon, is astonished at the view, and involuntarily exclaims, what can be done to arrest the delusion and he is shut up to one and but one answer, "Teach men the right use of their senses." Entreat them to reason in cases of injuries and diseases, as they reason about other things. If *diseases* have causes, it is reasonable to suppose that *cures* have - also, and these! be they what they may, must be something more than

homeopathic doses of various mineral and vegetable agents, since if the doctrine be true, every person must of necessity take more medicine when in health than when sick, for it is an incontrovertible fact that every glass of water drawn from the purest spring, contains much more than an ordinary dose of homoeopathic medicine! For ignorance in our profession we have a remedy, and we have reason to congratulate ourselves on the progress of the improvement in the education of physicians; but for imposture there is none: the mal-practice of a physician may be punished, but the deluded patient inflicts his own penalty; and as for the amount of it, apart from the ignominy, it far exceeds in severity, that of all the legal tribunals in the country. It may be difficult to estimate the amount of human suffering, and the waste of human life, occasioned by *medical imposture*; but to a close observer, at all acquainted with its prevalence, it must far exceed all the other known causes, which the restraints of law and the benevolent exertions in the cause of humanity are calculated to correct. The hydra-headed monster, intemperance, cannot boast half the success in the work of destruction that this can. It destroys its thousands by a comparatively slow and gradual process, this with no less certainty, but with infinitely more celerity; and strange as it may appear, while every exertion is made by persons of all classes, to abate the one and renovate the face of the society in which we live; the other finds, (and I speak of it with shame) apologists, nay supporters and friends in the recommendations of many of those, who are laboring in the cause of humanity with a zeal, which if it cannot command, deserves success.

I do not intend to speak a paradox, it is serious, solemn truth, and those who hear me know that it is so, quack medicines find their chief support, from the certificates of men of known character and integrity; from the clergy, and from such as have reputation to lend! It is not wonderful therefore that medical imposture is a prevailing evil: but it proves conclusively that good men are not always wise. If a man of character should give his advice to his neighbor upon an ordinary matter without having a knowledge of the circumstances upon which his opinions should be formed, there would not be an individual in the community in which he lived, who would not blame him for an unwise and unwarrantable interference, if perchance, the counsel should result unfortunately: and even if it should result otherwise, it would seem little less than a wanton exercise of opinion; and in this all men will agree: how much more culpable then, are they, who, in cases involving the most momentous issues, nay in many the questions of life and death, obtrude their advice, and certify to facts, of which from the very nature of the case, they must be totally ignorant? Are the questions of health and disease, vigor and decrepitude: life with all its enjoyments, and death with all its terrors, of so much less account in the view of such men than the ordinary transfer of a piece of land, a pair of oxen, or a span of horses! And yet this would seem to be the fact. Improper advice, more especially if it is proved to be interested, in cases where property alone is concerned, will subject the adviser to a penalty for his interference, and destroy the contract, in many cases; but those which involve all present comfort and all future hope, are left without defence. It would seem that law had made no provision for those, because it could not be foreseen that it would be required! The extent to which medical imposture operates in our community is indeed appalling; and it is by no means an extravagant assumption, that it is productive

of more evil, than any other species of imposture to which society is liable. For almost every other there is an antidote in self interest, but here that antidote fails of operation: so long as men remain ignorant, they must be the subjects of an interested delusion: their fears and their hopes are alike addressed, and in proportion as the one is urgent and the other buoyant, is sober and serious reason driven from the calculation of consequences. To suggest a remedy for this destructive plague may perhaps be easy; but to apply it — here is the difficulty. The public for the most part confound under one general denomination all those who profess to deal in medicine; and they are disposed to treat the whole body of physicians, as men prosecuting a vocation, merely for the sake of the profits which it yields: and so long as this belief is current, the opinions of the intelligent and educated portion of them will have little influence. We must be contented to suffer under the imputation alike disgraceful to us, and disastrous in its consequences to them, until they shall think it important to distinguish between the ignorant pretender, without conscience or education, and the well instructed physician, whose conduct and conversation attest that he possesses both. It should be the business of the physician on all occasions, to shew to the public the folly of committing their dearest interests in health and disease, to the keeping of those who affect to despise all acquirement; to inculcate upon them the necessity of judging of physicians, as they do of other men, and in the same manner. The manners, morals and intelligence of a physician, are to be learned as the manners, morals and intelligence of other professional men, and it requires very little more native good sense to form an accurate judgment in the one case, than it does in the others. There is one argument which we can urge without the slightest danger of being charged with interested motives; our profession is a liberal profession, it has for its object the relief of *suffering* humanity, and however some men may pervert it, it is nevertheless true that by far the largest part of its remuneration is found to be the *luxury of doing good*. In such a vocation there is no room for secrecy, and to hold a *nostrum* or secret remedy is a disgrace to any man who calls himself a physician, for by this single practice, he degrades the character which is its essential ingredient he converts so far as he can his profession into, a trade, and tells the world that his object, is simply to make money, without regard to consequences. Finally gentlemen, in view of the evils which every humane and intelligent man, whether a physician or not, must seriously deplore, I see no remedy more likely to be effectual, than a frank and open expression of opinion by the profession of the disastrous consequences of medical imposture, which to do good and to have influence, must be accompanied by a correspondent liberality of individual conduct, and a constant practice of our profession in a spirit of candour and humanity, which shall commend itself to all, and serve as a standing commentary on the truths which we publicly express. This is as much our interest, as it is our duty, since the whole profession suffers, through the unworthy conduct of many, who call themselves physicians. But if it were not as much our interest as our duty: if interest and duty should, in this instance be found to conflict; nothing can be less doubtful, than that the foundation of a physician's reputation, must always rest on a conscientious discharge of all the obligations of truth; cunning and deceit, nay even such a deficiency of moral courage as

will operate to prevent their exposure, are incompatible with the station he aspires to occupy, as a high minded, liberal and intelligent physician.

In offering to you these remarks on a subject of deep interest to the community, I feel that I for one can speak disinterestedly; having for several years left the practice of the profession, I have of course no object beyond that of my fellow citizens in general, and who, if they duly appreciate their own domestic welfare, will foster and encourage by all honorable means the advancement of medical *science*.

Since the last meeting of our society I regret to state that Dr. John H. Steel, a former president, has departed this life. After acquiring his profession he served for several years as surgeon in the U. S. Navy, and in this capacity visited various countries. I am not acquainted with the history of his life, further than to say, that on leaving the service, he settled at the village of Saratoga Springs, where he rapidly acquired an extensive business. He represented the county of Saratoga as a delegate to this society, and in 1824 was elected a permanent member. In 1835 and 1836 he officiated as president. Dr. Steel is advantageously known as an author. Besides several communications in medical and scientific journals and in our transactions, he published an interesting analysis of the mineral waters of Saratoga and Ballston which came to a second edition in 1830. This work displays ample knowledge of chemistry and mineralogy, and indeed I presume the discovery of iodine in those waters is justly due to him. Although but little beyond the prime of life, his health had for years been failing and we have now to lament his death at a period, when he might have been still contributing new facts to medicine, and its accessory sciences.

