LEC

ON

THE RESPONSIBILITIES

OF

THE MEDICAL PROFESSION.

BY JOHN P. HARRISON, M. D.

LOUISVILLE, Ky.
PRINTED BY W. W. WORSLEY.
.....
1831.

LOUISVILLE, August 27th, 1831.

Doctor HARRISON:

DEAR SIR—

Acknowledging our obligation to you for the instruction received from your lectures during the past summer, and feeling the importance of the principles, (to the medical faculty generally, as well as to ourselves) inculcated in your valedictory address, delivered to-day at the Louisville Hospital—we would respectfully solicit a copy for publication.

With sentiments of high consideration, in behalf of the Class,

I am, Sir,

Your obliged, humble servant,

A. G. HENRY.

DEAR SIR:

Your polite note, soliciting, in behalf of the Class, a copy of my valedictory address for publication, has been received. It affords me satisfaction to find that my humble effort to set forth the high and solemn responsibilities of physicians has been responded to by your cordial approval.

I send you a copy of the lecture for publication, agreeably to your request.

Yours, respectfully,

JOHN P. HARRISON.

Mr. A. G. HENRY.

August 29.

LECTURE

ON THE

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE MEDICAL PROFESSION.

GENTLEMEN:

In bringing the series of summer lectures, to which you have so attentively listened, to a close, I cannot take my leave of you, in the capacity of an humble contributor to your improvement in medical knowledge, without dwelling, for a few moments, on the responsibilities involved in the practice of the profession which you have adopted for your pursuit in life. The dignity and importance of the medical profession, are to be correctly estimated by a due consideration of the great and responsible duties devolving on physicians in the exercise of their vocation. It is a work of magnitude that you have undertaken. High and difficult are the intellectual and moral efforts demanded, that you may attain the great ends of the profession. In order to fill your minds with a just appreciation of the extent, variety and greatness of the obligations which are connected with the profession of medicine, advert with serious attention to the leading scope and ultimate aim of all medical knowledge. The physician operates not on brute, unconscious matter. His sphere of agency brings him in direct contact with life—the life of his fellow men. He holds in his hands the earthly destiny of his fellow beings; to him is committed the awful and responsible task of watching over, with scientific eye, the workings of disease as they prey on the health of fathers, mothers, children, and of either, by his skill, restoring them to the cheerful light of day, or, by his ignorance, hastening them into the darkness of a premature grave. I am aware that medicine, in its best estate, is an imperfect art; that even when its most faithful and skilful ministers have availed themselves of all the resources of the art of healing, they have, in many instances, to lament the limitation of their means of cure. Still, much good can be accomplished by a scientific application of those remedial powers which a kind Providence has

placed in the hands of man. Disease may be arrested in its ravages on the human frame—pain alleviated, or subdued, and life made more tolerable, even under incurable maladies, by the judicious prescriptions of the skilful physician. My object, gentlemen, in this lecture, is not to throw a grain of incense on the altar of professional vanity—not to magnify the men who practise medicine, but to magnify the office of a physician, by indicating some of the more prominent duties devolving on medical men in the exercise of their professional functions. I wish you to feel the great and responsible position you are at a future day to occupy in society, and to impress upon your minds the moral necessity which is laid upon you of making due preparation for your contemplated sphere of life. Let the importance of the station be rather felt and acknowledged in its beneficial results, than ostentatiously displayed by any course of offensive conduct. Then the consciousness of the magnitude of your undertaking, instead of being suffered to evaporate in vain airs and pompous pretensions, will produce a concentration of your powers in the exertions you employ to prepare yourselves for an honorable discharge of the duties of the profession. You should apply to the work with zeal, and anticipate important results. The moment you think lightly of your profession, your resolutions abate, and imbecility and relaxation of effort take possession of the entire man. No man ever excelled in any profession to which he did not feel an attachment bordering on enthusiasm. A high and honorable feeling of emulation should breathe through all your studies. This feeling is the plastic spirit which, penetrating the depth of your souls, rouses every energy of your moral and intellectual being to run with usefulness and renown the race set before you. Permit me to remind you that the chief distinction and crowning glory of man is his intellectual and moral nature. That the developments of this intellectual and moral nature, are the ultimate purpose of all education. That the active faculties of the mind, and the best feelings of the heart, are never more powerfully elicited than when brought to bear in the exercise of the high functions appertaining to that active occupation of life which you have chosen. And think not that I utter language, on this occasion, at war with sober reality. The estimate put upon the medical profession by the brightest intellects is in accordance with the above declaration. Let me adduce the testimony of one or two disinterested witnesses. The celebrated poet, Pope, thus speaks of the members of our profession: "They are, in general," says he, "the most amiable com-

panions and the best friends, as well as the most learned men, I know." The learned Dr. Parr, of England, asserts, "That after a long and attentive survey of literary characters, I hold physicians to be the most enlightened professional persons in the whole circle of human arts and sciences." Blackstone, in the introduction to his Commentaries, advises physicians to read law, in order "to complete the character of general and extensive knowledge which this profession, beyond all others, has remarkably deserved." I have sheltered myself behind the above eminent authorities to sustain me in the high appreciation which I have put upon our profession. The demands made on the intellectual and moral capacities of the physician are full of solemn responsibility. Diversified and accurate knowledge on all the branches of the science is, of course, of indispensable importance in order to qualify him to practice the art of curing diseases with success. But the physician should not only be learned in medical science—intimately conversant with the structure of the human body, and possessed of a comprehensive acquaintance with the principles of medicine—but he must be an honest man. Not merely honest in his pecuniary transactions; but honest in a higher and more extensive sense. He must possess the *to kalon* of character; he should be a man of honorable, liberal, and noble bearing in society.

The science of medicine is a vast field of investigation; and the practice of it is a thorny and perilous way, in which a stern trial is made of moral integrity. To the study of the science, you should bring faculties disciplined by a previous training of classical instruction, and of the other branches of a liberal education. Your minds should be qualified, by previous habits of study, to undergo a protracted process of analysis, of deduction, and of research. If your mental powers have not been exercised in intellectual inquiries before you commence the study of the science of medicine, you will be liable to be discouraged by the first difficulties which present themselves, and abandon the toilsome task altogether, or irritated into impatience, your minds will be driven to the more objectionable plan of creeping along the path thus beset with obstacles, with discredit to yourselves and injury to society. The great fault of the young men of our country is an unwise and restless desire prematurely to enter upon the scenes of active life—whence results a crude and superficial preparation for the responsible duties of the respective professions they follow. This evil does not exist to the same extent, nor has it so injurious an influence on society, in the

mechanical avocations as in the professions of divinity, law and medicine. A young man is generally obliged, by the articles of his apprenticeship, to undergo a proper novitiate that he may be qualified to be a good workman. I am aware that the different religious denominations of our country are every day becoming more and more convinced of the demands of society for an enlightened ministry. Legislative enactments guard the bar, in some measure, from the incursions of ignorant lawyers. And, in some of the states of our Union, there are severe laws against quackery in medicine. Still, especially in Kentucky, the profession of medicine is overrun with greedy and rapacious followers of mammon, who care neither for the honor and dignity of the healing art, nor for the lives of a credulous public who employ them.

Gentlemen, truth has its sternness and authority—and it obliges me thus to speak.

The consequences of this eager and impatient wish to rush without due preparation, upon the arena of active life, sheds a fatal blight and withering spell upon the future eminence of every young man who is under its governing authority.

The late Judge Tilghman, of Pennsylvania, in his eulogy on Dr. Caspar Wistar, who was one of the most distinguished supports and ornaments of our profession, very justly observes, "It has been remarked that, with few exceptions, those who have been great in the learned professions, have abstained from practice at an early age. The cause is obvious. The elements of science lie too deep to be attained without long and patient thought. The mind requires retirement and tranquillity, to exert its powers of reflection to their full extent. But these are incompatible with the bustle, the anxiety, the agitation of active life." When a young man precipitately throws himself forward in the ranks of an active medical career, he soon feels his inadequateness to the office he has thus most unwisely —nay, most iniquitously undertaken. Finding that he cannot sustain himself by the internal resources of his own mind, and not having moral honesty enough to resist the allurements of gain, he has recourse to the various shifts, crooked ways, and degrading expedients, by which quackery seeks to entangle its victims. Or, if his remaining feelings of pride will not allow him to practise the arts and devices of the nostrum vender, he still is apt to slide into a sort of vaporing, or assume eccentricities of conduct alike inconsistent with real science and the honor of a high-minded man.

Dr. Rush, who has written with so much ability on the ethics of the profession, and who has reflected such a flood of light on practical

medicine, makes the following judicious remarks on that spirit of empiricism which so much disgraces many of the professed members of the faculty.

"There is," says Rush, "more than one way of playing the quack. It is not necessary, for this purpose, that a man should advertise his skill, or his cures, or that he should mount a phæton, and display his dexterity in operating to an ignorant and gaping multitude. A physician acts the same part in a different way, who assumes the character of a madman or brute in his manners, or who conceals his fallability by an affected gravity, or taciturnity in his intercourse with his patients. Both characters, like the quack, impose on the public. It is true they deceive different ranks of people; but we must recollect there are two kinds of vulgar, viz. the rich and the poor, and that the rich vulgar are often on a footing with the poor, in ignorance and credulity."

You thus perceive, from the language just quoted from the greatest medical philosopher America has ever produced, that for a physician "to advertise his skill or his cures," is placing himself side by side with him who pretends to cure disease with a secret remedy. The principle involved is the same in both cases. Both characters attempt to impose upon the public by holding out false allurements to confidence, and, by a crafty appeal to ignorance and credulity, strive to win a spurious reputation. The true dignity and honor of our science demand of every physician who regards his profession with any elevated conceptions of its rank and of its utility, to frown upon every man who thus attempts to impose on the public. Each enlightened and honorable medical man is bound by the highest considerations of the duty he owes himself and of the responsible relations he sustains to the profession and to the public, to employ every moral resource in his power to repress the spirit and exercise of quackery in medicine. There are men who make the profession of medicine a base medium through which they can practise, successfully and with impunity, delusion and imposture; and who, governed by sordid self-interest, creep their reptile way along a filthy path, to the summit of public confidence—whose best acquirement is that of a bold asseveration of the cures they *intend to perform*, and of whom it may be said that the only benevolence they manifest is that of giving a quietus to the troubles of their patients, by a speedy dismissal from life. The nostrum vender, or dealer in secret remedies, daily and hourly contravenes the obvious philanthropy of our profession, in wrapping up in impenetrable mystery and secrecy,

for his personal profit those means of restoring health which, in his venal dissimulation, he pretends to possess. The great ornaments of medicine have been men of the warmest benevolence—whilst empirical pretenders have ever, Cacus like, concealed their remedial agents in the gloom of a depraved selfishness. Jenner, the illustrious benefactor of his race, was a type of the true physician Bombastus Paracelsus was the representative of the vampyre brood of quack doctors.

Medicine is a liberal and intellectual pursuit. All mystery and concealment are in direct opposition to the spirit of our science, both in its intellectual and moral bearings and tendencies. "Come and see" is the inscription which blazes in living capitals on the front of the temple of medical science. This noble edifice stands with its foundations built on the rock of truth; its portals are open day and night for the admission of every sincere inquirer after knowledge, and on the walls within are hung the votive tablets of the many thousands who have been cured by the faithful ministers that trim its golden lamps, and burn sacred incense on its altars. Without its hallowed enclosure are seen the base tribe of greedy quacks, and venal pretenders, who ply their lying trade about its walls, and seek protection under the shadow of its ample dimensions.

To every true disciple of the healing art is committed a high and responsible trust of keeping the deposit of his profession's honor with untiring watchfulness. To such belongs the delicate and, at the same time, magnanimous office of watching over the best interests of the profession. That physician proves derelict to his duty who is found mingling in the ranks of the nostrum monger and prating mountebanks of the profession. What! Shall the educated physician be seen associating on terms of professional equality with him who practises artifice and imposture in order to circumvent and delude a credulous community? Shall those who have gathered their inspiration and their light from the high priests of our science, pollute themselves by such disparaging intercourse? Must we countenance those who *call themselves* physicians,

> "As nimble jugglers that deceive the eye,
> Drug-working sorcerers that change the mind,
> Disguised cheaters, prating mountebanks,"

to play off their cozenage on the people without any disapprobation on the part of enlightened and virtuous physicians? Shall a degrading rivalry in money making extinguish the light of all honorable

feeling in the minds of medical men? Let each young man who beholds such a disgraceful exhibition, as is sometimes seen, of successful charlatanry, rest assured that the reign of error and imposture is brief—that the foundation of the empiric is laid on perishable materials, and that though he may amass wealth, that no sure and abiding honor attends his career. Veracity is violated by such a man every time he administers his nostrum, for he is practically setting his seal to a delusion which his own false statements have engendered? Is truth, the tutelary genius of science, the best friend of erring man, and the only sure guide and safeguard of our happiness? Then, the man who wilfully propagates a lie and practically affirms it, is, most assuredly, the enemy of his race. The nostrum vender is, therefore, an enemy of man; he is a blot and an anamoly on the beauteous face of God's moral creation, and should be shunned as the upas tree—for he lives in an atmosphere of deception, delusion, imposture, and sordid self-interest.

The responsibilities of the medical man are of a momentous kind. He is to understand his profession well before he attempts to practise it; and he is bound, by every just consideration of his responsibleness, to improve himself every day, in order to meet the daily demands made on his skill with augmented usefulness to society. Gathering, from every available quarter the elements of knowledge, he must, by intellectual analysis, convert them into the sound deductions of a well balanced judgment. But he is called upon likewise to be a man of strict veracity, of exemplary sobriety, and of faithfulness to his professional obligations. Truth should be personified, as it were, and put into unceasing exercise by the physician. He should reject all ostentation and paradeful exhibition of his business, and manifest a dignified simplicity in his intercourse with society. A man, filled with a desire to fulfil his duty, lives for reality, and not for display. The ways of duty to such a man are direct, and the means of accomplishing them simple. Such a one has intellectual and moral improvewent always before him, and, regulated by this unity of view, he preserves habits of candor and honesty with himself and with those around. Cultivate, therefore, this true dignity of character, and, let others debase themselves as they may, ever preserve this moral excellence. Animated by these views and considerations, your course will be onward and upward; step by step, you will ascend into a freer atmosphere, and reach a more expanded prospect. Thus all your energies will be borne along unconditionally and unreservedly towards the objects to

which you should consecrate yourselves with absolute devotedness. Let every thing be consistent in your plan, then there will arise no embarrassment in the execution of the work undertaken—your minds being fixed in a just decision, and your efforts springing from a determination to achieve the object before you.

Let the crafty empiric boast of his success in a course of sordid and grovelling self-interest, in which career he has sported with the credulity and ignorance of the multitude. But remember that the only stable success attends the men whose intentions are honorable and upright. Such men, by degrees, are discovered and made known; they form immutable and advantageous connexions with society, and their reputations are guarded by a deep founded esteem, which is increased and confirmed every day. Disdain mean, transient, and little ends, and seek a wide and solid foundation for your professional standing. Rise above the mere motive of accumulating money, to the kindling energy and solemn joy which are inspired by an enlarged philanthropy. Fear not to oppose popular delusion when it bows down at the footstool of charlatanry, nor ever hold intercourse, or in any other way give encouragement to men who are "cheating the eye" of the public "with blear illusion," in order to make that illusion the pander to their base desire of personal aggrandisement.

In conclusion, let me press upon your consideration, the necessity of a calm and determined perseverance in the pursuit of professional eminence. Remember that weakness of character is restless, impatient, and full of contrariety of purposes—that a feverish and imaginative mind, which is ever changing its plans of action, can never arrive at any elevation; that fixedness of purpose is absolutely essential to success in any laudable enterprise, and that no man can excel in any walk of life unless he has power to adhere to the motives which first suggested his determinations. The world, it has been truly said, is full of people who have conceived and undertaken great and noble things, but who failed in their accomplishment. Perhaps there are very few well regulated minds who have entered upon the investigation of medical science that did not form some brilliant plans of professional eminence, and hoped to realize them. But how soon the efforts of many quail before the difficulties of the way; how very few reach the bright goal which once glittered before their aspiring wishes! How melancholy is it to see the ocean of life covered with so many wrecks of lofty hopes and noble aspirations! But, gentlemen, I hope better things of you. Your

career, I trust, will be one of usefulness in the world. May you have patience to labor with sedulity of endeavor in the profession which you have adopted, and may a hallowed feeling of benevolence actuate your minds in diffusing around your path in life the fruits of that charity which is "twice blessed"—blessed in him who gives, by irradiating his soul with the peaceful smiles of an approving conscience, and in him who receives, by smoothing the brow of anguish, and restoring health to the pained and diseased body. Then your course will be luminous, with a divine radiance, and "the blessings of them who were ready to perish" will descend on your heads, fraught with the purest joys which man is allowed to taste in the present introductory stage of his immortal existence.