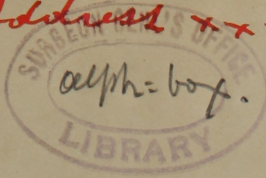


STEARNS (John)

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A D D R E S S ,

DELIVERED

ON THE OCCASION OF ASSUMING THE CHAIR AS PRESIDENT,

AT THE

FIRST REGULAR MEETING

OF THE

NEW-YORK ACADEMY OF MEDICINE,

February 3d, 1847.

By JOHN STEARNS, M.D.

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1847.

# NEW-YORK ACADEMY OF MEDICINE.

Instituted Jan. 6, 1847.

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## A D D R E S S .

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GENTLEMEN OF THE

NEW-YORK ACADEMY OF MEDICINE :

I CANNOT assume the responsible duties incident to the honourable station that I am unexpectedly called to occupy, without soliciting your co-operative aid, and a charitable construction of the motives that may dictate all future decisions from the chair.

It is with no ordinary gratification that I am permitted to witness so large and so respectable an assemblage of the medical profession, assuming membership in this Academy of Medicine, and exhibiting such harmony of feeling, such unity of action, and such ardent zeal in promoting the honour, the respectability, and the usefulness of the medical profession.—This is a sure presage of the success of our efforts to benefit mankind, and to alleviate the ills of human life.

Unfortunately for the medical profession, but few of mankind duly appreciate their disinterested labours in the cause of benevolence. Every effort to mitigate the pains and the agonies of the body, and to restore health, is unjustly ascribed to interested motives—*exclusively* to an avaricious desire for pecu-

niary compensation. That some of our profession justly merit this imputation, I freely admit, but at the same time, believe that a majority of this class are entirely ignorant of the fundamental principles and design of medical science. They have assumed the practice exclusively for gain, and are perfectly reckless, as to the effects of their remedies, provided their avarice is gratified.

All of this class would abandon the medical profession, at any moment that any species of quackery should present a prospect of greater gain. Ample proofs of this fact daily occur in our city.

Every age has had its impostures in medicine, whose endurance has seldom exceeded an ephemeral existence—popular as they may be for a short period, yet the people have only to witness their destructive ravages among their own families and friends, to be convinced of their falsity. Distressing as this conviction must be to those who, at such great expense of life, have patronized the impostors, it will, at some future period, be greatly inferior to the tortured feelings of those who administered the fatal dose; who have abandoned a practice amply proved to be successful when directed by skilful and judicious physicians, and confirmed by the experience of the wisest men through a long series of ages, and have adopted a practice at variance with reason and universal experience—renouncing a certainty for an uncertainty.

But a day of retribution will come: popular delusions will be dissipated, and they will then



be tried before the courts of public opinion. If they tremble at the results of temporal tribunals, what must be their feelings when arraigned before that tribunal where conscience alone presents the charge, and unerring Justice pronounces the sentence and inflicts the punishment. They stand before this court, convicted of impositions, which have resulted in the sacrifice of life—I appeal to those who are implicated in this charge, to define the penalty that such practice justly merits. Impositions of the worst character were most prevalent in those dark ages of ignorance and error, when medical science was enveloped in the same dense obscurity that enshrouded every species of science and literature—when magic incantations, and every kind of absurd imposture, were practised upon a debased community, and the practice of medicine almost exclusively confined to the clergy—when with passive obedience the people submitted to their dictation, and took their medicine, and imbibed their dogmas, with entire devotion to those who controlled their faith. In such a degraded state of society there was some apology for imposture, and for a deluded people. But in the present civilized and refined condition of the world, when literature and science have made rapid strides towards the summit of perfection—when bigotry and persecution are yielding to the prevalence of truth, and to pure and vital religion—when medical science assumes a prominent place in the Temple of Fame—when the practice of physic and surgery never before attained to such unrivalled

success—when diseases, before deemed incurable, now promptly yield to the skill of the scientific and judicious practitioner—when surgery has attained an unrivalled eminence in the performance of operations deemed impossible, until their perfect success was practically demonstrated by some of our own members, who have thereby justly earned imperishable renown—when a thirst for improvement in science, literature, and the arts, pervades every class in society,—then, at this enlightened period of the world, arose a Hahnemann, a Dickson, a Priessnitz, and a host of others, so numerous as richly to merit the name of “Legion.”

Some of these innovators, just arrived in the scientific world, and disgusted with a science which they admit they never practised, and consequently could not comprehend, pursuing the example of the Arabian impostor, retired each to a secluded cell, where each concocted his own peculiar system—systems which are now flowing in upon us in torrents—not like those genial showers, which invigorate and refresh the mown grass, but which, possessed of lethal qualities, bear a stronger resemblance to those which inundated and desolated two ancient cities.

Some practitioners who were eclipsed by their competitors in science, and could not attain the highest professional eminence, nor shine with unborrowed lustre promptly abandoned the profession, and adopted such of those innovations in practice as are now proved to be unsuccessful and inert. It is perfectly in character with their sudden conversion to pass high

commendations upon the system of their choice, and to manifest equal zeal in defaming the one they have abandoned. They have, consequently, omitted no opportunity, nor spared any efforts to operate upon the credulity and prejudices of the people; naturally opposed to medicine, many have been influenced by such unworthy means. This state of defamation and slander has already been permitted to endure too long. Thousands have already fallen a sacrifice to these multiplied impostures, whose blood is daily invoking the aid of the medical profession to arrest their progress. Duty to God, to the profession, to the memory of the fallen victims, and to mankind, compel us to respond favourably to the invocation. We will proceed to do our whole duty promptly and efficiently. This growing evil must be arrested in its deleterious course.

The present all-absorbing propensity for innovation, indicating danger to the community, and degradation to that noble science which it is our professed object to cultivate and improve, calls loudly for some efficient ramparts to protect and shield its vital principles against every grade of amalgamation with the popular delusions of empiricism. Do not the state of the public mind, and the signs of the times in both the religious and medical world, indicate an approaching period when it will be inscribed over the portals of the halls of science, "Ilium fuit?"

What then does our duty to the profession, and to the public, require? What measures shall we adopt to dissipate popular delusions, and to restore medical

science to that high confidence in the public mind which it eminently merits? I trust that this grave question will in due time be considered and discussed in a spirit of amity and mutual desire to merge all local and individual preferences in the adoption of such measures as may best promote the important objects we all may have in view, and that will most effectually secure to the community an ample protection against the imposition of those who wantonly immolate health and life on the altar of mammon. To elevate the standard of medical education, to exclude from our profession all ignorant pretenders, to enlighten the public mind on the subject of medicine and its collateral branches of science, and to take all necessary measures to promote the honour, the dignity, the respectability, and the usefulness of the medical profession, appear to constitute the important topics for our future consideration.

When I attempt to analyze the doctrines taught by Hahnemann, I am promptly met at the threshold with the avowal of principles which astonish and confound, and very naturally induce the inquiry, Do I possess the faculty of reason, and what is its import and design? Is it not to investigate truth, to direct us in our walk through life, to enable us to choose the good and to refuse the evil; to preserve health, life, and happiness? If the fundamental principles of the Organon be true, then have I given an erroneous definition of reason, for it meets those principles with a decided contradiction.

Reason teaches me that the power of any remedial

agent essentially depends on the number of grains, ounces, or pounds, of which that agent consists. But Hahnemann contradicts this position, and maintains directly the reverse, and asserts that the power of that agent is increased precisely in proportion to the subdivision, the comminution or dilution of its component parts.

To illustrate this, I will cite a very analogous case : If one pound of gunpowder will propel a cannon ball one mile, the millionth part of a grain would carry it around the globe, and produce the greatest possible destruction of human life. The same remarks are applicable to steam, and to all other agents of similar power. Well might Hahnemann forbid his pupils to reason or to theorize on his principles. They have hitherto rigidly adhered to his injunction.

In attempting to explain the precise objects which he intended to accomplish by such an extraordinary publication, I can arrive at no other conclusion than that the whole of his *Organon* was prepared for the express purpose of ascertaining how far he could successfully practice deception and imposition upon the credulity and prejudices of the community ; for I do sincerely believe that he had too much common sense to believe in the truth of the doctrine that he promulgated.

Poisons and narcotics constitute the corner-stone of the homœopathic edifice. Deprived of these, their whole system of *Materia Medica* would be demolished. The alleviation of pain by *narcotics* gives to their practice all its popularity. No man in the

full exercise of reason can believe in the truth of this strange doctrine ; and if he attempts to practice upon the principles which that doctrine inculcates, he must possess a most depraved moral faculty.

I have often heard it asserted that the clergy are advocates of Homœopathy, but this charge is too inconsistent with their profession to admit of belief. Their duty to God, to their fellow-men, and to themselves, is of so holy a character that they should be placed beyond the reach of such calumnious charges. How can they patronize a practice which impairs health, destroys life, and which must necessarily injure their own usefulness as guides to eternal happiness ? How can a religious man support a system which places reason and common sense at defiance, and which rests exclusively on the vagaries of a visionary enthusiast ?

If the clergy, like Hahnemann, repudiate reason, how are they to prove the truth of our holy religion, the existence of a God, and a future state of retribution ? Such reasoning would give peculiar delight to the Infidel and to the Atheist.

The general avowal of such principles would subvert all true religion and civil government, and lead to consequences appalling to all reflecting minds. I therefore earnestly solicit all who still persevere in propagating this new doctrine to pause and consider.

GENTLEMEN,

JUNIOR MEMBERS OF THE ACADEMY :

A PORTION of your elder brethren will soon leave the Academy as a sacred legacy to your particular charge. The ardent zeal which you have manifested in the organization of this Institution is an unerring presage of the vigilance and care with which you will receive and protect this important trust—you will preserve it unsullied from every species of quackery. Permit no impostor to obtain admission within its sacred walls. Let the inscription over your portals be, *Esto perpetua*. Remember it is consecrated to science, to health, to happiness, and to harmony, which I trust will always be its prominent characteristics ; and may it be the nursery of thousands and of tens of thousands, and rise like the sun, in all its meridian glory, to shed its scientific rays over the whole world. You have long known with what disreputable means the medical profession has been assailed, and its science defamed, by a combination of irregular practitioners, whose diplomas constitute the only testimonial of professional merit which they possess, and who are now luxuriating upon the spoils fraudulently obtained by impositions practised upon the credulity and the prejudices of the community. On you devolves the important duty to repel these assaults upon a science which we all revere and highly appreciate, as essentially necessary to preserve the

health, the life, and the happiness of man. I trust that you will advance to its protection and defence in perfect harmony and unity of action, in one solid column, one undivided phalanx ; and while you support all salutary improvements in science or in practice, promptly repudiate all innovations that contravene reason and well-founded experience.

It is a most fortunate occurrence, for the purity and the high character of the medical profession, that a great portion of its assailants have abandoned the regular practice, and have identified themselves with those ramifications of empiricism, which require no medical education, no seminaries of learning, nor any qualifications for practice ; where the most ignorant contest the palm of success with the most learned, and often appropriate to themselves the award of public opinion. Should the residue of this class, follow the example of their associates, and assume the practice of homœopathy, or any other imposture—then would the profession shine forth in all its appropriate lustre, like gold well refined. Then would the abuses of mercury, now such a prolific theme for calumny, cease to be charged upon the profession ; the trumpet tongue of slander would be paralyzed, and the fragile systems of quackery annihilated.

I trust that the measures now so auspiciously commenced, will, under your vigilant co-operation, produce all these favourable results ; and that those of you who are well instructed in the science and



practice of medicine, will never abandon the profession for the popular delusions of the day. Merit will ultimately receive its due reward.

Could I be assured of the uninterrupted and enduring prosperity of the Academy, in disseminating health, happiness, and the sustaining principles of life, I should die in peace, with effusions of gratitude and praise to Almighty God for His permanent blessings upon our labours.





