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ON THE UTILITY
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Country Medical Institutions.

AN
INTRODUCTORY LECTURE,
DELIVERED AT THE
College of Physicians and Surgeons
OF THE

WESTERN DISTRICT OF THE STATE OF NEW-YORK

DECEMBER 13, 1824.

BY **T. ROMEYN BECK, M. D.**

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of New-York, &c. &c.

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ON THE BUDGET

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PREFACE.

THE Professor of the Theory and Practice of Medicine in the New-York Medical College, recently published in the New-York Prints an extract from his *Introductory Lecture*. In that production, the following sentences occur :

“ The State of New-York, powerful in wealth, and ample beyond all comparison in resources, with a capital that holds a distinguished pre-eminence among her sister cities, cannot be blind to the obvious propriety of contributing to *one* institution that support which can alone make an adequate return to the community ; instead of wasting her strength in various and *comparatively* unimportant county institutions. Indeed, it may reasonably be anticipated, that not only the Legislature of this state, but of every other in the union, will soon perceive the wisdom of concentrating their efforts upon the School of the Metropolis, instead of multiplying Medical Academies in towns and villages, that of necessity can only furnish the first lessons of education, instead of the great practical results that are derived from extensive clinical observation and experience.”

The application of the above remarks will be readily understood by the most careless reader, when he is informed, that the only Medical School in the state, beside New-York, is the Western Medical College at Fairfield. He should also be apprised of the fact, that both institutions have an equal standing *in the eye of the law*—that both have been incorporated by the Regents of the University, and that both have been endowed by the liberality of the state. It must also be added, that there are not, within the knowledge of the writer, or his medical friends throughout the state, *any County Medical Institutions* in it.

These facts, in the judgment of the author, justify the publication of the following Lecture. He trusts that the ideas advanced in it, are deserving of some consideration, and although prepared in haste, and amidst the pressure of many engagements, is willing that the manner should be criticised, provided the matter finds favour.

INTRODUCTORY LECTURE.

GENTLEMEN,

THE revolution of another year has brought together in this place, the teacher and the student. On entering into this interesting connection, I beg, on my part, to offer you my best wishes, and to assure you, of my earnest and most assiduous exertions to promote your advancement in medical science.

It is now upwards of twelve years, since this institution was incorporated. During that period, its fortunes have been various, and its prospects often discouraging. But it has struggled through its period of infancy, and I trust may now be considered as steadily advancing in prosperity and utility. Its pupils have for several years slowly but regularly increased,* and many, (indeed I may add) a great proportion of them, have returned a second, and even a third time, to avail themselves of its advantages. The senior members of the board of professors have also the pleasure of learning from time to time, that num-

* In 1820—1, the number of students attending, was 43.
1821—2, 62.
1822—3, 91.
1823—4, 96.
1824—5, 120.

bers of their students are acquiring a respectable professional standing in society, and while thus rising to merited distinction, are not unmindful of their *alma mater*. The pupils of former students of this college form no inconsiderable part of its present classes.

These results are doubly grateful. They at once announce, that success has already attended our endeavours, and they promise a continuation of usefulness.

The period is now, I trust, for ever past, when doubts will be entertained concerning the necessity of a well educated medical profession. Public opinion, that mighty engine in a free country, will no longer tolerate insufficiency in preliminary knowledge. It understands the true distinction between *experience* and *experiment*. It has ascertained that the practitioner who boasts that he knows only the results of the former, drawn from his own observation, has frequently done nothing more than employ the latter, at the hazard, and even at the expense of the lives of his patients. And such undoubtedly must sooner or later be the invariable result in every instance.

Take an individual of this description, under the most favourable circumstances—that of having studied in the office of a physician during the time prescribed by law. When that period is completed, he enters on the duties of his profession. He has seen the diseases of a small, confined district, for a few years. His knowledge of anatomy

has been derived from books, or it may be, from the examination of a skeleton. He has probably viewed one or two surgical operations, and attended a few cases of midwifery, perfectly natural in every respect. His range of medicines is confined to such which his instructor used, and beyond these, let it be remembered, he seldom ventures: for there is certainly no prejudice more firm or unalterable in persons of limited education, than an attachment to particular articles of the *materia medica*. Let a person thus prepared be called into the ordinary routine of practice, with one who has regularly studied anatomy, surgery, and midwifery—who has learnt the virtues of numerous and various medicaments, and is aware of the many ills to which “flesh is heir.” With whom is the possession of that boasted experience, which is so much used as a catch-word to depreciate the advantages of learning? Is it not with him who has gained an acquaintance with what is already known in the science, and who can thus safely and knowingly proceed in the application of curative means? The contrary doctrine leads to this conclusion as a legitimate deduction from it—*no knowledge is valuable except it be derived from personal experience*. An opinion more destructive to the improvement of the understanding, or the happiness of society, can hardly be imagined by the most ingenious sophist.

Education then is indispensable to the medical student. The love of self, the dictates of an hon-

ourable ambition, the feelings of humanity, all prompt us to its acquisition. The spirit of the age calls for it. It imperiously prescribes a proportionate advancement in the elements of our science with what is made in other professional pursuits, and if we regard either our happiness, or our reputation, we shall not neglect its dictates.

The triumphant establishment of this doctrine brings us however only to the threshold of our subject. It is not enough to prove that education is important and valuable—we must show how it is to be attained, and in doing this, I must be permitted to offer some preliminary observations on the state of our country.

The scattered state of our population is certainly one of its most striking political features. We have hardly any district in which the denseness of its inhabitants approaches that of European countries, and even our large and crowded cities are few in comparison with those of the eastern continent. Our ten millions of human beings cover an immense tract of country from the Atlantic to the deserts of the Rocky Mountains, and they form small and separate communities, leaving room for indefinite expansion in every direction. This is even the case in our more populous settlements. The American farmer frequently occupies an extent of ground which in Germany would constitute a principality, and in Great Britain a baronial manor.

A state of things like this leads to several peculiar results, both in domestic life as well as in public concerns. The services of religion, for example, can only be attended at a considerable distance from the residence of the farmer. If he finds it necessary to engage in legal controversy, he has often to proceed a day's journey before he can reach the seat of justice. The mill is many a weary mile from his home, and the mechanic can only be found at distant intervals along the main road. How is it as to the physician in these districts? One, or at most two, of this profession reside within a compass of eight or ten miles, and attend with infinite labour to the calls of their scattered patients.

This is a brief, but I believe, an accurate statement of the condition of a large portion of the United States. Its wants deserve attention—its peculiarities require consideration, and he who neglects or despises these, has but little of the foresight of the statesman, or the feelings of the patriot.

It need hardly be added, that wealth is but sparingly diffused among communities such as those we have described. The farmer lives by the labour of his hands—his family is supported from the hard-won avails of honest industry, and though he may look forward with just confidence to the period when his possessions, through the increase of population and their proper cultivation, will greatly swell in value, yet these are

prospects for the *future*. The *present* must be provided for with more economical views. And among the many subjects of parental anxiety, there is none which more engages his attention than that of a proper education for his offspring. All feel the value of this—all appreciate its importance—the most ignorant as well as those who are comparatively well informed. The country, through the medium of its legislatures, has nobly fostered these wishes, and has placed within the reach of all who will avail themselves of it, the means of elementary instruction. Its effects can hardly be yet appreciated, but it is surely a maxim attested by experience and hallowed by age, that knowledge and virtue are the only permanent supports of a republican government.

Talent is here elicited and developed—a thirst for knowledge is created. Not satisfied with his present information—aware that he has only mastered the elements of knowledge—the ingenuous youth pants for new opportunities to increase his little stock. Self instruction often supplies a part. He gradually advances, until he has reached the full extent of his powers, and he has to search for more elevated sources. These are supplied by our academies and colleges. In illustration of these remarks, is it necessary for me to recapitulate the history of many a man in our own nation who thus commenced his career, who thus struggled through his youthful years in comparative poverty of body and of mind, and who is

now the ornament and the pride of his state, or his country ?

The poet Gray, in his elegy written in a country church-yard, thus apostrophizes one of the tombs :

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
 A heart once pregnant with celestial fire,
 Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed
 Or waked to extacy the living lyre.

Was this a fancy of the imagination ? Did not such men in former times emerge from the obscurity of a village ? Why then not some of these ? He gives us the answer.

But knowledge to their eyes her ample page
 Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll,
 Chill penury repressed their noble rage,
 And froze the genial current of the soul.

Penury and the want of knowledge—these are the obstacles to advancement, and these are to be obviated by all the means which patriotism can suggest. Our state has for this purpose endowed academies and colleges—she has poured forth her wealth to advance the cause of education, and she exhorts her citizens to aid in these philanthropic exertions. I will not indulge in any comparison between the two kinds of literary institutions that I have mentioned, nor depreciate the one by exalting the other ; but in the view which I have taken of the present subject, it is indispensable to suggest, that academies are probably more generally useful than colleges, from the fact that in the former are educated the teach-

ers of our common schools. They are also more numerous, and although the instruction is less extensive than that obtained in higher seminaries, yet it is acquired at a cheaper rate, and is imparted to a greater number of individuals. The perfection of a national system of education undoubtedly would be, that all who possess competent talents should be enabled to pass from step to step through all the branches of knowledge. This was the scheme of that sagacious individual who not many years since, guided the destinies of France. But it can hardly be realized during many years in this country, and we must hence encourage that plan which promises the most extensive diffusion of science and learning—commensurate with the means of our citizens. Public or private beneficence, when needed, seldom deserts the youth of talents and virtue, when he has acquired the rudiments of classical education—it carries him through his collegiate course, and allows him to enter into public pursuits with advantages equal to his wealthy competitor.

I may now ask whether the observations that I have made apply to students of the medical profession? Is the statement correct as to the attainment of education generally—and does it not apply to a component part of it? Are all medical students the sons of wealthy parents? Can they at pleasure avail themselves of the advantages of the ancient medical institutions of Europe, or the establishments in the large cities of our own con-

tinent? If not—should the study of the profession be confined to such? Are parents and sons, thus circumstanced, willing to agree to this, or has the other, (and let it be remembered,) the more numerous part of the community consented to the exclusion? How, in fine, are physicians, if the above views be correct, to be supplied for the districts that I have previously mentioned?

Like all other studies and occupations in this country, the votaries of medicine are in this respect of a mixed nature. Their means vary, and as a necessary consequence, their opportunities must vary. But is it not proper to make some public provision suited to these distinct conditions? Would it be wise or just, to afford all the facilities for acquiring this learning to a favoured few, and leave the rest in utter darkness? Fortunately in our own state, public opinion will not sanction this. It has ordained, through the medium of our laws, that a certain course must be pursued, before the student can become a practitioner. In furtherance of this salutary regulation, it has endowed two medical institutions, who are to impart the required instruction—the one situated in the imperial city of our nation, and the other in this place.

It appears to me, that a calm and unprejudiced observer in noticing this arrangement, would conceive it somewhat adapted to the necessities of the case. He might possibly conjecture that some students could be found throughout the state, who

were unable to avail themselves of the advantages of an institution on the sea-board. Feeling some sympathy on this point, the warmth of his philanthropy might possibly induce him to imagine that the country *college*, was in some degree useful, and that while the city *university* elevated and embellished the scientific character of the country, the other, in its humbler sphere, was training its pupils for their more local and confined duties.

Such however is not the opinion of some of our profession. A few weeks have only elapsed, since sentiments were uttered from a professor's chair in the Medical College of New-York, condemnatory of all schools like ours. It was gravely urged, that "the state of New-York should contribute to *one* institution that support which can alone make an adequate return to the community, instead of wasting her strength in various and *comparatively* unimportant county institutions," and it was added in the language of hope, that "our legislature would concentrate its efforts upon the schools of the metropolis, instead of multiplying medical academies in towns and villages, that of necessity can only furnish the first lessons of education, instead of the great practical results that are derived from extensive clinical observation and experience."

Expressions like these coming from an individual of reputation, and published in our public prints, are calculated to excite some inquiry ; and

we are naturally led to ask whether all this be correct or not. I venture to say, that the ideas advanced are far from being correct, and that on points, where the comparison between city and country institutions is intended to be most marked and palpable, it is frequently but little discernible. Such remarks, however, will justify us in respectfully defending the utility of country medical institutions, and in endeavouring to point out some of their advantages.

1. If the views I have given in the preceding part of this lecture are founded in truth, do they not in the *first place* prove the utility of country medical institutions to those students, whose pecuniary means are confined? Is it not advantageous to society, to diffuse learning, even if only partially; and is it not certain that many would be deprived of every opportunity of acquiring it, were the institutions in question abolished? Believing then that they are adapted to the wants of a portion of our community, and in fact imperiously demanded, I observe,

2d. That the instruction they furnish goes beyond the "*first lessons of education*," as the professor terms it. In illustrating this assertion, it is necessary to advert to the actual condition of those medical colleges which boast so much of their means of education. Comparisons are indeed odious, but where they are so freely proffered, it will not surely be improper to examine into the respective merits of each. What then,

as an abstract question, is to prevent anatomy from being taught as perfectly in a country village, as in a large city, provided the proper materials be at hand? What constitutes the difference between one anatomical school and another? It is the opportunities for dissection and the value of the museum. Again, as to chemistry, if the apparatus required be at hand, can it not be taught as perfectly here as elsewhere? May not all the doctrines of surgery, of midwifery and of the practice be developed and illustrated? But it is observed, that in such institutions as ours, the *results of clinical observation and experience are wanting*. I would be the last to undervalue these. None prizes them higher than I do, or feels more their importance and place in a well regulated education. But I assert, and it is a fair argument on the present occasion, that these benefits are not obtained in a proper degree, even in our other state institution, and that she should therefore be the last to notice and enlarge on this defect. In proof of this, let me direct your attention to a single fact. The professor of clinical medicine appointed under the authority of this state, was a short time since, for two years, without a ward in the hospital—an institution also richly endowed through the liberality of the state of New-York. Under the present order of things indeed, the incumbent is now a physician of that charity, but he too is dependent on the will of a foreign body, and may be removed at any moment and on the shortest notice.

Again, the diseases found in a hospital are generally (although I do not say universally,) those originating from debility or from vice. They are not, in other words, the ordinary diseases seen in general practice throughout the country, and of course though important to be understood, are not of the first importance. On the other hand, what is the clinical instruction of the country student? It is this—after attending a course of lectures on the several branches of medicine, and becoming acquainted with their general bearing, he during the summer repairs to the office of a practitioner—attends him in his visits to his patients—views the diseases peculiar to different districts—observes the treatment that situation or habits of life indicate, and from day to day verifies the lessons he has received. Here then is evidently a direct preparation for the life he intends to pursue. So also with respect to surgery and midwifery. Opportunities for improving in both may be readily attained by studying with those who are eminent in either branch, and I will venture to add, that the variety of cases thus observed, is not inferior to many of the boasted institutions in our cities.

3. It may be added in the third place, that country institutions are admirably adapted to the state of our country as already developed. Let us compare their results for a moment, with the state of the profession generally in Europe, or more particularly in Great Britain. The mass of medical men there, as here, are general practition-

ers—that is, the same person attends to medicine, surgery or midwifery, according as his services in in each, are required. Their medical colleges are confessedly very eminent and flourishing, but they are few in number and expensive in instruction. The consequence is, that a considerable part of the profession are unable to attend them. Would not the public welfare be promoted by rearing a few inland establishments, calculated for their condition? Their compensation is necessarily small—their lives obscure and laborious, yet they probably superintend the health of a majority of the inhabitants of the kingdom. It has been urged by medical legislators, that every man should there, as here, be obliged to attend a course of medical lectures before he can practice. The chief obstacle to such a measure, unfortunately is, the expense attendant on medical education.

A system like our own, on the other hand, insensibly diffuses knowledge, prevents the most obscure practitioner from being ignorant of the leading and valuable parts of his profession—and gives to the remotest and most scattered population, the blessings of proper advice.

4. I will only add another consideration, and that is—the secluded situation of our country institutions is calculated to direct the mind to study. If large cities have their advantages, they have certainly also the disadvantages of luring the youthful mind from habits of industry, or what

is still more to be deplored, of inviting it to indulge in vicious dissipation. To the anxious parent—to the ingenuous youth, it is certainly an object of some importance to find establishments, where humanly speaking, the latter can be avoided, or is not to be dreaded.

In offering these remarks to your consideration, I have not, I trust, been led away by any prejudice or partiality for this institution particularly. Although I am attached to it by many ties, yet I have endeavoured to consider the subject and present it to you in a general manner, and to exhibit to you, as far as I was able, the advantages of *Country Medical Institutions*. You will not understand by what I have said, that it is my design to depreciate the institutions of our large cities.—On the contrary, when properly managed and honestly conducted, they have done and will do much to elevate and enlarge medical science.—But I also claim some small share of utility for such as ours. When I see men in them in different parts of our country, whose talents are acknowledged, when their students are from year to year developing minds which do honour to themselves and their instructors, I cannot doubt their advantages.

It is therefore idle, it is more—it is illiberal to depreciate them. *Our own is the only one in this state.* Why should it be visited with destruction, when on our eastern border, a cordon extends at various intervals, from the boundaries of

Canada to the Atlantic. Would the recommendation which I have quoted, of subverting it, if effected, destroy the system? Would not another, and yet another, spring up in the more western parts of the state? Instead then of adopting this advice, I would foster every attempt at diffusing medical knowledge, and hail its progress as a promising token of good.

The state of New-York we may safely predict, will never adopt the counsel that has been given her. Her statesmen, her legislators, her learned men, and her citizens generally, have not thus estimated the wants of the community? Her course uniformly has been to cherish learning in every situation, and to foster its first fruits with the care of a parent. At this crisis, flourishing in arts, unrivalled in commerce, and exalted in wealth, she surely will not stint her supplies, or pour them with a partial hand, into one portion of her dominion, while she leaves the other to need. She will not destroy what is flourishing, or overturn what is becoming permanent. She will, as she has ever done, regard the interests of education with an impartial eye.

In thus doing, she can alone perform her proper duties, and fulfil the promises of her high destiny.

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