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WOMAN AS A PHYSICIAN

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ANALYSIS



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*Editor Med. Times*

# WOMAN AS A PHYSICIAN.

BY

J. P. CHESNEY, M. D.,

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The question as to the propriety of admitting women to the benefits of a medical education, preparatory to entering professional life, through the facilities now offered by our medical colleges and hospitals, necessitating as it does in most instances a "mixed clinic," has opened up the whole question of "woman's place in nature," and has, of late, occupied much attention and elicited much comment and discussion from the medical press, and the various medical organizations, throughout this country and in Europe.

In considering a subject of so wide a range there have, of course, been varied and conflicting views; the querulous and discontented finding ample scope for controversy, while the sober and considerate find presented for their analysis, a theme of important and profound inquiry. A dozen years ago, few among us had a thought that this, among a vast array of others, would be a question presenting itself for our solution. But the last decade has been a period pregnant with events of importance to the human family, and it may prove that the advent of females as physicians, was not the least among



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them. At all events, the issue, whether of our seeking or not, stands out in bold relief, and it would be well for all interested to understand that it, like all questions of its class, can only be settled by the calm and unprejudiced reasoning which will examine the matter in all of its phases; giving the proper importance to any merit it may be found to possess, and stern condemnation to its errors.

The question has been viewed by its opposers, from three stand-points: the moral, mental and physical; the most strenuous and plausible objections being made by those who take the ground that the moral status of woman, or the moral status of medicine, rather, forbids their engaging in such pursuits; and, while they certainly bring to their aid much that is logical in argument, I am persuaded that close scrutiny will reveal the fact that their general position on this division of the subject, is entirely untenable. The moral aspect of the matter has really but one side; it is either right or it is wrong, and which it is, is a question not for the medical profession alone to solve, but one that must be tried by the high court of public opinion, a tribunal before whose bar we all have to be judged as to our professional capacities.

I may anticipate, by saying, that I am not of the fanatical school which would have the world believe that woman may properly claim and exercise any or all of the prerogatives of the sterner sex, as if that doctrine should be universally admitted, our scientific, social and political fabric might, ere long, assume a complexity that would confound philosophers, in other fields than medicine.

A position of that kind would necessitate charges of a grave and absurd oversight in the plans of creation, in withholding from them beards and other attributes which constitute distinguishing marks between the sexes, besides giving us an example of a palpable violation of impartial justice, in imposing upon them functions which often prove a source of physical pain, danger and death, while in all things else they should remain on an absolute equality. There is a wise

and broad sense of justice pervading all nature, which leaves little room for us to impeach the arrangements of the Divine Author of the Universe.

On the other hand, I am not one among the other extremists who look upon every departure by woman from the sphere in which we have been accustomed to find them, as an effort on their part to unsex themselves, and while I doubt not that there are many fields of usefulness besides medicine, yet unoccupied by them, to which they might, with equal propriety, direct their energies, that fact does not alter the principle as to the right or impropriety attached to their becoming members of the medical or any of the learned professions. To become doctors is undeniably their abstract right, and their inclinations and qualifications should be immediately recognized as the only legitimate condition to their entry into, and peaceable occupancy of, the field of practical medicine, in any or all of its departments.

This is an era of advanced ideas in regard to most human occupations, and it is possible that we have, until lately been pursuing chimerical ideas in regard to the capability of woman to enter, successfully, the higher pursuits of life; an idea which, perhaps, might properly be classed as a counterpart, and add a third to the "twin relicts of barbarism," of which our political friends used to talk so much. The broadest liberality, and most charitable conduct and sentiment, should actuate our noble profession in dealing with this question. We are, perhaps, the last portion of society, in whom it would be proper to allow narrow views and ill-judged prejudices to usurp the place of reason, and the most exalted magnanimity.

Much as I admire the conservatism, character, and profound learning of Prof. Samuel D. Gross, proud as I am to belong to the same profession with one possessed of so many noble qualities of head and heart, and warmly as I feel toward most of the sentiments expressed by him, during his remarks on this subject, at the recent meeting of the Medical Society of the State of Pennsylvania (*Medical and*



*Surgical Reporter*, June 25, 1870), I can hardly be persuaded that it was "a prurient and itching curiosity which called them there, nothing else" (having reference to nine young ladies whom he had observed attending a surgical clinic sometime during the winter before), as it might have been in them that exalted and responsible feeling which actuates all true devotees of physic, urging them to sacrifice, on the altar of science and future benevolence, all the grosser feelings of the human soul, and giving them power to rise superior to the groveling propensities, which so often animate the hearts of those engaged in pursuits less related in their nature to the ministrations of the angels. I apprehend that even young men are usually so deeply impressed with the solemnity and responsibility inseparably connected with the associations and work of the practicing physician or surgeon, that in most cases, even during their pupilage, "prurience" is seldom an important element in their cogitations. I am of the opinion, and few will take issue with me upon this particular, I presume, that the same truth will hold good, and to a much greater extent applied to females under like circumstances, as I believe the female sex to be master, or mistress rather, of their sensual appetites, to a far greater extent than are men. I can think of no better test, than to ask every medical gentleman, who has conscientious doubts as to the moral propriety of women assuming the duties of physicians, to apply his objections to himself, in relation to his own feelings, when young, and perambulating the wards of women's hospitals, or to the sentiments which actuate him in his professional dealings with the opposite sex; and I am safe in the assertion, that he will be the better fitted to render an impartial verdict in the case at variance. Can he not be generous enough to allow that pure feelings would animate and inspire to noble efforts, in relieving human sufferings, her heart as well as his? Is she not his equal, if not his superior, in all the moral and Christian attributes? It is an idea extremely paradoxical, to suppose that woman, the fairest and best of God's handiwork, and practical medicine,



a calling little less sacred than the holy ministry itself, should, when united, become a loathsome abomination, a moral pestilence, from which virtue must stand widely aloof.

I am well aware that few men now occupying place in the ranks of legitimate medicine, would remain, were they convinced that the calling had attached to it a contaminating quality. Why should not medicine injure man's morals? Is man better proof against inroads from moral contagion? There are a hundred prostitutes of his sex to one of theirs—custom of his own making, allowing him a little more latitude in gratifying his sensuality—not a difference in the principle. The old philosophy, that it is a poor rule that will not work both ways, is as applicable in this case as in any other. After all that may be said in regard to the matter, I conceive that there is no great difference between the moral stability of the sexes, circumstances being equal. It needs no strain of imagination, to suppose that women, who will bear with unflinching stoicism, the scoffs and unmanly insolence of the thronged lecture-room (the "tax of impudence, a strumpet's boldness, a divulged shame," and are "traded by odious ballads" and "names <sup>SAC</sup>red otherwise," are insulted by "obscure <sup>EN</sup>caricatures being thrust upon their lap," all for the sake of science, and the hope to be of future usefulness), are of no ordinary type of brain and nerve, and are likely to perform with credit to themselves, and benefit to their clients, any duties they may undertake.

If the same logic now advanced by the opponents of lady doctors, had been adopted a few centuries ago by the profession, and the public, in regard to the propriety of the sexes "mixing" in a professional capacity, men would long ago have been scouted from the field of obstetric and gynecological medicine, and the important scientific and humane results, which have rewarded the labors of those conducting these inquiries, might never have been realized; and an important field of the present physician's and surgeon's most successful and useful practice, would yet have been in the keeping of the ignorant and brutal midwife.

Had that absurd notion outlived its opposition, hundreds and thousands of the world's female population who now live in health to testify to its folly, would still have been "doomed to tread with weary step life's barren waste, where no beautiful oases — green with verdure or blooming with flowers — had adorned the deserts of their lives; where no evergreen glades or shady bowers, with notes of prattle upon the balmy breeze, had rested their weary forms or cheered their aching breasts; where no silvery rills, nor pebbled brooks, nor purling streams had danced in the sunset's mellow gleams, to cheer them on their lonely way. To them the charms and endearments of domestic bliss, and the fond imaginings of a mother's endearing love had never, never come, only in fleeting and ever changing visions, that vanish on the waking of the dawn." (Battson.)

Those who imagine that women are of little moment in the conduct of the world's advancement, should remember that they have in all periods of the world's history, been first to stanch the tottering fabrics of morality and religion; and that to-day their hands are the first to drag from the depths of degradation and ruin, the helpless inebriate, and the fallen of their own sex; they are the first to brave the dangers of the storm-tossed ocean, the scorching sands of the desert, the pathless wilderness—leaving behind them the comforts and endearments of home and civilization, they throng to their self-immolation, that the benighted denizens of the earth's remotest verge, may find eternal life. In the camp, in the hospital, on the gory battle-field, they hold the cup to the parched lips, soothe the aching brow, and with their tender presence, yield the sunlight which raises thousands from the couch of despair, or smooths the rugged pathway for those who had before known no hope. In a word, their usefulness in the hour of suffering, danger and dying, is unsurpassed—unequaled by their male companions, notwithstanding their claims to a greater share.

I am aware that we can find few precedents in the annals of ancient medicine, upon which to base a spacious defense



of women's entering the pursuit of physic; but as this moral bugbear seems to loom up in gigantic proportions on all occasions, when the question is talked of or written upon, it is well to stop and institute an inquiry as to whether there has ever been anything observed in the conduct of female aspirants to the honors of the M. D., to warrant the conclusion that the "hobby" has its foundation in fact. The world has never, so far as I am informed, accused Florence Nightingale of lewdness, nor has an "itching curiosity" been the governing incentive in the professional career of Elizabeth Blackwell, and Miss Garrett. Nor have I seen an authenticated instance in which a female medical student has been charged with "prurient" or unbecoming conduct. If anything of the kind had occurred, the lynx-eyed populace, who are ever on the alert for items of scandal, would not long have kept the world from the benefits (?) of the important secret.

It would seem that the war on the "innocents," on the score of moral grounds alone, has nothing for its foundation more substantial than the "baseless fabric of a vision." Let gentlemen be perverse as they may, it is evident that "female physicians" are to become a recognized feature in our professional household: they number among their supporters many of the first medical men in Europe, and this country. Among the familiar names in Great Britain may be mentioned Sir James Y. Simpson (lately deceased), Robert Barnes, J. Hughes Bennett, Lionel S. Beale, Wm. B. Carpenter, Thomas King Chambers, Curling, Erichsen, Murchison, Sieveking, etc., and others whose names I can not now remember. On the other hand, it numbers among its avowed enemies many names of eminence and authority, not the least among them Prof. Gross, of Philadelphia.

The prediction of a recent foreign writer upon this subject is that "women will soon take a high place among medical practitioners in this country (England); nothing would tend more toward human progress, the diminution of human suffering, and the prevention of disease, than the admission

of females to all branches of the healing art." When our College and Hospital authorities recognize the justice of the sentiment expressed in the foregoing extract, and so far divest themselves of preconceived and, to my mind, erroneous ideas in regard to this matter, as to admit on terms of equality to their lectures and clinics, students of either sex, who may present themselves with proper credentials, the contention would be hushed into quiet: then, and not till then.

In adding to this part of the subject, I can do little better than improve Hamlet a little—a thing which my readers will no doubt say would be no small task for an older and wiser head than mine. He asks, "What a piece of work is a man?"—What a piece of work is Woman! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form, and moving, how express and admirable! in action, how like an Angel! in apprehension, how like a God! the beauty of the world! the paragon of creation! "All this and more" might well be said in her behalf, though "this goodly right, the earth, seems not to me a sterile promontory," nor "the o'erhanging firmament a foul and pestilential congregation of vapors."

In considering woman's capacities to occupy successfully a place in practical medicine, the second stand-point, that of mental adaptability, is reached. It is a singular fact that this, the most essential prerequisite to her worth as regards her relation to the sick, in the capacity of physician, has been almost entirely ignored as a debatable point; and the one of infinitely the least importance—morality, allowed to monopolize the discussion.

Even amid the great clamor raised throughout this country, and in most countries of Europe, for more efficient intellects to begin with, more thorough preparatory training, and a higher standard of requirements generally, for male students, before admitting them to the honors of the Doctorate, the female portion of the medical world have almost totally escaped attack, in the most vulnerable quarter; and is thus left, to enjoy the delusive supposition that they are perfect as to mental material.



Physiology and anatomy teach us, that there is a very wide dissimilarity in the arrangement and functions of the physical organization of the two sexes; but that in the mental organization there is very slight difference to be observed.

In the female, the osseous, the muscular, the vascular, and (least of all) the nervous systems, are unlike those of the male; and even the composition of the blood is different. When, however, we come to compare the important function, the intellect, the marked difference before observed everywhere to exist, here, in a great measure, disappears; leaving the two sexes nearer on an equality in this than in any other characteristic. There is in this particular certainly a difference observed, and it is in favor of the male: the cerebral hemispheres in the female being inferior in size; while there is little or no observable discrepancy in other portions of the encephalon; the superior development of brain substance in the male, however, only corresponding to his superior physical development.

While candor compels the admission that her powers of logic and analysis may not be so profound as those of the sterner sex, her intuitive powers are certainly greater than his; her perceptions more acute, and her apprehensions quicker; often enabling her to scan the human character, read the feelings of others, and probe the hidden mysteries of the human heart, when man's most searching investigation would be completely inefficient. This principle in the female mind, is equivalent to that trait in the minds of mankind in general, which allows that first impressions of any given occurrence, founded upon a reasonable relation of the facts attending it, are, commonly, more nearly correct than those formed after deliberation, this faculty bearing a close correspondence to that of instinct.

The characteristics of the female mind, above set forth, could in no pursuit be of more ready application, and of more value, than in practical medicine; as while a profound knowledge of the principles of the science is often essential in arriving at correct ideas in pathological problems; yet in

many diseased conditions, particularly among the susceptible and nervous of her own sex, among whom her practice would mainly be confined, their nature can only be made apparent by exploring the hidden recesses of the soul—the whole human fabric, moral, psychical and physical. Her powers of interpreting the feelings of others, her ready sympathy with the afflicted and unfortunate, and the strength of her intuition, guiding to clearness and decision in judgment and action, can but render her an efficient aid in the sick household.

While we are not inclined to debate the proposition that women are equal, in point of intellect, with men, we have the premises clearly before us upon which a very material part of this inferiority depends, namely, the lack of opportunity; particularly is this the case with our Western females, who have had the advantages of education very sparingly meted out to them. With all our modern civilization and Christian progress, our women have been, and are yet, too generally looked upon through the shadow of the long intellectual night, which for so many weary centuries preceded the waking of the dawn, two hundred years ago; and which yet occasionally flits across the splendor of our intellectual noonday. While woman has not the same facilities afforded her in our institutions of learning, whereby she may receive primary and complete training, equal to that bestowed upon the male sex, we may not expect to find her equal in intellectual development.

However this matter of female education may have been lacking in the past, the noble generosity of such men as Vassar, and the wise liberality evinced by our people generally, in our own generation, in this direction, have been and will yet be, the means of perfecting, as nearly as can be, our already advanced civilization. Indeed, our females have themselves awakened from the long night-slumber which enveloped them, and are making Herculean efforts toward equality in the affairs of life; efforts which promise to be crowned with a greater degree of success, and to be



fraught with more important results than the most far-seeing could have anticipated, a quarter of a century ago.

We now find them in the school, the college, the hospital, the hustings; on the bench, at the bar, in the office, behind the counter—everywhere! And their ingenuity, integrity, perseverance and economy, have given them a place in most of these positions, hardly excelled by the most accomplished of their male compeers.

The only place from which woman has been sternly driven, the one in which the enlightened Christian age, in which we live, would have expected first to have found her, is the pulpit; it has been proof against all her endeavors to enter its holy precincts; and she has to confine her Christian ministrations to the outskirts of the religious domain. This, I can not help regarding, as another evidence that we are not yet entirely freed from the influences of superstitious and bigoted intolerance. It is claimed that it is against the teachings of the Scriptures to permit women to publicly proclaim the teachings of the Bible; and that a violation of the doctrine thus taught, would expose the perpetrator to the wrath to come. Woman's mission on earth, is peace and love, and her chiefest "glory is going about doing good." It would be difficult, indeed, to find fields more fitted for her ministrations, than the souls and bodies of men.

Although the disparity between the intellectual endowments of the two sexes, has been spoken of in a preceding portion of this paper, it must not be inferred from what is there said, that the difference is acknowledged to be great; or that women are not adequate to the attainment of the most exalted positions intellectually. That they are, and ever have been, found in many of those stations in life, which are the reward of intellectual worth, is attested by the records of the past and the present. Examples are not wanting, in which woman has attained eminence in the arts, sciences, literature and politics; sculpture, music, the drama; astronomy, botany and medicine; poetry, fiction and history; diplomacy, government, and even war itself, have

acknowledged themselves debtors to the powers of her mind; and to her participation in the affairs of life in the future, must we look to be kept from retrograding into barbarism, and falling again into that abyss of degradation, from which the human family have so lately emerged. It must be remembered, that a just recognition by man, of woman's equality in all things socially, was the first step toward permanent civilization; and now the acknowledgment of her equality, mentally (and, perhaps, politically), remains to place the progression of mankind on a sure and lasting foundation.

I do not wish to be held responsible for the sentiment, which would admit the female world, indiscriminately, to the ranks of medicine; the same requirements as to mental capacity, preparatory education, and moral character should be required from them, as is exacted of male students when applying for matriculation. Indeed, the requirements in these particulars should be enforced with the most rigid exactness, in their application to both sexes. It is a fact everywhere recognized, that the most notorious and dissolute can gain access to our medical colleges, placing thus a lasting stigma upon the colleges, and an unjust reproach upon the profession. I hope never to be under the disagreeable necessity of recording the same against women's medical colleges and female students.

Women have always exerted a potent influence in the sick chamber, and not always for good, as I have no doubt most of my professional brethren can bear testimony. By having an educated class among them, to warn them of the dangers of intermeddling, the evils springing from this class of self-constituted doctresses might be very materially lessened. The power exerted by woman over the minds of the sick and their friends, in regard to the doctor to be employed, the remedies to be used, and indeed the whole conduct of the sick room, is truly wonderful, as every candid reader will admit; and this wonderful sway obtains over all alike—the rich and the poor, the intelligent and the ignorant—and, to my mind, constitutes a very powerful argu-



ment toward allowing her a thorough medical training, and fitting her to use this immense power in a wise, legitimate, and scientific way. Half the value of practical medicine originates from enforcing hygienic regulations and thorough control in nursing.

It would be superfluous to extend this article by a lengthy comparison of the physical powers of the sexes, the delicate bone and muscle of woman being indisputably outstripped by the brawny sinews of her rude companion. This, however, only holds good as a general rule, for it is equally certain that there are occasions where woman's physical superiority is so manifest that it leaves no room for argument; and these occasions are at the bedside of the sick. As a nurse her physical capacities are incomparably superior to those of man; thus presenting for her a claim to the ranks of medicine that can not be ignored when her claims are honestly considered. Who ever heard of a woman succumbing to the toils and exhausting vigils incident to nursing those in whom she was interested? It is the mother, the wife, the sister or daughter, whose eye is never closed, whose ear is never deaf, whose feet are never weary, while the necessities of the sick have a claim upon her. The morning's dews, or the gloom of midnight, deter her not from her humane ministrations; no one like her can smooth the painful couch, make sweet the bitter draught, or calm the aching heart; no one so ready to gratify the childish caprices or soothe the distempered imagination when "thick coming fancies" oppress the troubled brain. In fact, it would appear that there is a strange compatibility between women and the chamber of the sick; their benevolence relieving it of many of its terrors, while in its solemn precincts they learn, and teach, those lessons of humility and self-sacrifice which we are assured constitute half the wages of a blessed immortality.

When pestilence, in its most dreadful aspect, spreads dismay and death among its crouching victims; when famine's gaunt form fills the land with mourning; when grim-vis-

aged war gives the wail of the widow and fatherless to the pitiless winds, woman is the last to desert the post of danger, and often goes down amid the wreck that surrounds her. To brave these dangers, often more terrible than the cannon's mouth, requires an amount of physical endurance, mental and moral fortitude, possessed in a surpassing degree by but few men, if we except physicians. In trying epochs, like the present war in Europe, and during our civil war, when the larger portion of the male population (physicians especially) is taken from some districts, how inconceivably valuable might a medical knowledge in a portion of the females become?

It may, without detriment to the argument as to the mental and physical fitness of women to become doctors, be admitted that, while there are some departments of medicine more particularly adapted to their capacities and tastes, and in which they have proved themselves the equals of the most superior male practitioners—the field of obstetric medicine and surgery, for instance—there are some others, surgery in particular, in which they may not hope to become as efficient as men; though this can not, by any means, serve as an argument to keep women from the profession of medicine, as the same rule applied to men (a vast majority of whom have no capabilities as surgeons), would give our professional ranks an undesirable tenuity. Any rule which will hold good for men as a class, in the social affairs of life, will also hold good commonly with women.

It might be objected that the physical inferiority of woman would exclude her from participating in some fields of practice—the remote and sparsely peopled rural districts of our own and other countries, where practical medicine is made a business; and this is true to a certain extent, but not on a scale sufficient to alter the matter to any great degree, as the cities and thickly populated districts offer the widest field of usefulness and pecuniary success to all aspiring professional persons. We may expect that a woman now entering the medical profession will look high, and not



be content with an inferior place, either as to locality or acquirements.

In my effort to arrange my random thoughts on this subject, I have endeavored to report woman and her cause aright to the unsatisfied. If I have not succeeded to the satisfaction of my professional friends, it will be remembered that "the will is infinite, and the execution confined; the desire boundless, and the act a slave to limit."

be consistent with the public interest and the  
rights of the community. It is the duty of the  
authorities to ensure that the proposed  
development is in accordance with the  
planning and zoning regulations and that  
it will not cause any undue hardship or  
inconvenience to the surrounding area.  
The proposed development is in accordance  
with the planning and zoning regulations  
and it is in the public interest to  
approve the application.











