

Robert Esler (1836–1919)

President of the Ulster Medical Society

1887–88

Presidential Opening Address

Ulster Medical Society

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Gentlemen,—On taking the chair as President of the Ulster Medical Society, I may be permitted to make a brief reference to the past history and present position of the Society. At no previous period has this Society been in so flourishing a condition, both numerically and financially, as at present.

I would compare the practice of medicine and surgery in 1837 with that of 1887, taking as a means of comparison the lectures of Sir Thomas Watson, which were delivered in the year the Queen ascended the Throne. The contrasts are very striking. Take, for example, surgery. It need only be mentioned that chloroform was unknown, and that antiseptics had no place in the surgical treatment of fifty years ago. In midwifery practice, the substitution of hot for cold water injections has changed the method of treating haemorrhages with much advantage to the patient. And in gynaecology, the simple record of successfully performed abdominal sections speaks of progress with trumpet tongue. During the present year, five members of this Society have performed ovariectomy with perfect success in every case.

Let us look at the epidemics of fifty or sixty years ago. In Belfast there was an epidemic of cholera in 1832. The population was then 54,000; of these, nearly 3,000 were seized with cholera, of whom one in six died. Then the plague of 1836, known as the “Irish plague,” visited the town. From August, 1836, till June, 1837, four thousand persons were stricken with the disease. This was followed by influenza and erysipelas. An old pressman thus describes the state of the town at the time of these visitations:— “The people and their health were in the hands of an irresponsible body of Town Commissioners, whose effectness was only equalled by their corruption and jobbery. There were filthy streets on every side; disgusting lanes and courts, where every principle of the laws of sanitation and decency was shockingly disregarded; open sewers and abominable docks – all sufficient in ordinary times to induce a harvest of death among the population.” Then came the dark days of 1847–49, when fever, smallpox, and cholera followed each other in rapid succession. Out of a population of 60,000, 13,676 cases of disease were



recorded; 2,000 patients were in hospital at one time, and the death-rate was fifty a day. It will be remembered that this epidemic followed the famine of 1847; but behind this there was the neglected sanitary condition of the town, and a gross indifference to every recognised principle of sanitary law.

The people of Britain have been exempt from any very serious epidemic for many years past; and we fondly hope that, with a better knowledge of the laws of health, and a more vigilant sanitary inspection, the past will never be repeated.

Let us now, for a little, review the present position of medicine and medical men. Carlyle says that success is only to be attained and the world impressed by earnestness. If ever men were distinguished by earnestness, I think they are the 14,000 members of the greatest guild of professionally trained and educated men in the United Kingdom. Witness the work done at the annual meetings of the British Medical Association, and the earnestness with which matters concerning life and death and the general welfare of the community are

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discussed in the journal of the Association. Of the three learned professions, the medical occupies in some respects a distinguished place. Medical men deal with the most sacred possession – life, and they are trusted concerning the most sacred and the most secret thoughts and actions of their patients. It is gratifying to know that from the Royal palace to the humblest home the members of our profession occupy the position of being the first friend and last benefactor, the first to welcome mankind on his entrance to life, and the last to bid a long farewell at a time when earthly remedies fail to keep the flickering lamp alight. During the perilous days of childhood, in youth's prime, and manhood's decline, the physician is taken into confidence and consulted about possessions more precious – although often less regarded – than houses and lands and parchment rolls :-

“A wise physician, skilled our wounds to heal,
Is more than armies to the public weal.”

There are many matters in connection with the medical man's relation to the State which demand attention. The entrance to all public service should be uniform and by examination. The present humiliating practice of canvassing for dispensary appointments would then be avoided, and the best men secured. The remuneration should be sufficient to enable a man to live by his appointment, and leave him some time to work in the field of investigation, and not, as at present, a hybrid appointment, part public, part private, too much to starve by, too little to live by. The expense of any such change is always made an objection at the Treasury, but where life and the public health are at stake, expense need not stand in the way in a country which voted an extra eleven million pounds in a single night to keep the Russian out of Afghanistan and the Turk from controlling Egyptian finance. A million a year would give an immense impetus to the work of scientific research in connection with Preventive Medicine.

On the question of social position, matters have been rather improving of late years. A few of the leaders of the profession in London, Dublin, and Glasgow have received the doubtful honour of knighthood, a smaller number being esteemed worthy of a baronetcy; but so far the hereditary legislators have not considered any physician or surgeon worthy to sit in their chamber. This honour is reserved for landowners, soldiers, and lawyers. We in the provinces think that all talent is not confined to the capitals, and that it might be wise for the State to occasionally bestow distinctions on leading lawyers or doctors, so that mayors of towns might not have a

monopoly in this matter. Should this idea occur to the Government, or should the Lord Lieutenant at any time wish to confer an honour on medicine in Belfast, there could be no difficulty in finding a representative man among the distinguished ex-Presidents of this Society.

There is no profession which does so much for the public and the public good, without fee or reward, as the medical profession, and there can be no doubt that this has cheapened the service and lowered medical men in the estimation of those they benefit. Yet, withal, the position of the profession is well maintained in this country; and with the brilliant results already obtained, and the yet greater discoveries of which the near future gives promise, we have no reason to be dissatisfied. Alfieri thought Italy and England the only countries worth living in – the former because there nature vindicates her rights, the latter because there art conquers nature. Of the professions medicine is both an Italy and an England. It pre-eminently deals with nature in first assisting her best endeavours, and, second, in turning her worst malformations into harmonious beauty.

In regard to prospective medicine, permit an illustration. In the time of Linnaeus there occurred in the shipyards of Sweden a rot in the timber. The King sent for the celebrated naturalist, who discovered an insect in the wood which laid its eggs in April. Linnaeus directed that the logs should be submerged from March till May. This was done, and the rot disappeared. That prevention was better than cure in this case is a tolerable certainty.

During an epidemic of cholera the inhabitants of Edinburgh petitioned Lord Palmerston to proclaim a day of fasting that the plague might be stayed. His reply was characteristic of modern discovery “Clean out your drains.” That the medicine of the future is to be largely preventive is the present prevailing opinion. Whether the human lungs will ever be subjected to the influence of carbolic or other disinfecting substance which will destroy the bacillus of tubercle is an important problem, or whether sanitation can be made so perfect that no trace of the exanthematous poison will linger in the sewers, awaits solution alike by sanitarians and public corporations. In both of these departments we are only on the borderland of investigation.

What the public at present want is a cure for their ills. What medical men most desire at the present moment is to discover the cause, so that they may be able on scientific grounds to institute the means of preventing disease. Much land remains to be occupied. The very ablest investigators are at work in

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the research department, and if we may judge from the past, the future is not likely to be barren in results. If during the next twenty years as good results are obtained in preventive medicine and sanitation as have been achieved during the past twenty in anaesthetics and antiseptics and abdominal surgery, the present generation of medical men will not have lived in vain.

In making a forecast of the medicine of the future a variety of circumstances present themselves – some favourable and others unfavourable to the medical man's prospects. Broadly viewed on the surface the present outlook is bad enough. What with hydrophobia, homoeopathy, faith cures, quackery, and quack remedies, it might be thought that our occupation is gone. Every newspaper one takes up is nearly filled with the most emphatic statements, put in the clearest and cleverest form, of cures effected by the use of only a few bottles of the particular specific, after years of suffering under a multitude of doctors and months of residence in various hospitals. Advertising has been reduced to a science, and the cleverest quack reaps the largest fortune. It is a matter of money expenditure in the first instance. What the particular article recommended may be it matters not. The public like to be quacked. They do not object to pay for the operation. But, bad as we are in this country, things are much worse in America, where they have got a thousand infallible remedies for every disease.

There is much quackery carried on in this country under the cloak of religion. I do not believe in trespassing on the functions of the minister of religion; I am equally jealous that he should not trespass on mine, and I often wish that clergymen would attend to their own profession and leave quackery alone. We are willing to grant first place in the professions to the minister of religion, although the profession of medicine, if not co-equal with, stands but little below that of divinity. The God-man was healer as well as preacher, and it falls to the lot of every one of us to daily preach sermons by our lives and actions, leaving words to others. Irish medical practice has at present to contend with the double difficulty of a diminishing population and an increasing profession. During the past seven years more than 4,000 members have been added to the Medical Register in these kingdoms.

The question of population is always one of primary importance to medical men. First, there is the ratio of marriages in relation to the population. This is said to be regulated largely by the character of the harvest. That being so, the present should be a

favourable time as not for many years has food been more abundant or cheaper than now. It is probable, however, that there are other factors to be taken into account. The present expensive style of living and the large wage rate of women may have increased the denominator, and reduced the matrimonial quotient; besides, early marriages are not so common as they were twenty years ago, and it is well known that when a man attains the age of thirty he hesitates before entering the married state. In the higher ranks of life the size of families is diminishing. In France and America small families are the rule. In Britain Malthusian doctrines and Malthusian practices may not be professedly popular, but it would seem as if they were being adopted. Ireland in this matter, as in many others, must be left to take her own way. She has a will of her own, and part of her creed is a large family of small children. Production may be normal in this country, but depletion goes on by the tide of emigration.

A subject of present importance to a Society like this is the membership of women. They are entering the ranks of the profession; they will soon knock at the door of our medical societies. The time is past for discussing the capacity and adaptability of women for medical studies. It is said that women are fascinated by gold and men by beauty. The latter assertion is admitted, but regarding the former I think there are other attractions than gain for women in the medical calling. Women make patient nurses; they will be quick observers and safe prescribers. For my part, I am in favour of leaving all fields open to those who are strong enough and brave enough to enter them. Meantime, we note that nearly all the colleges are opening their doors to women. The full effect of this change on the practice of the future it would at present be difficult to determine.

A striking circumstance of the present time is that *assertion* on medical matters has almost the weight of *proof* with a large portion of the community. Pasteur asserts that he can cure hydrophobia; immediately there is a rush of dog-bitten patients to Paris. Unfortunately for Pasteur's popularity, a number of the patients have died. We all know that cases of hydrophobia following dog-bite, or indeed from any cause, are exceedingly rare. It may be presumed that the majority of all go to Paris for treatment have not been bitten by rabid animals, and that some of those who were so bitten have succumbed. In our own town recently a dog, said to have been rabid, bit a number of children, who were submitted to treatment somewhere in this country. What is most surprising to me in this case is the class

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of persons who contributed to assist in carrying out this quack treatment. The delusion is only equalled by the case in which James Russell Lowell supposes the horse to be persuaded, by the use of green spectacles, that he is eating grass, instead of straw. I conceive it probable that cases of hydrophobia may be diminished, or the disease even stamped out in the future. My present remedy would be to diminish the number of useless and objectionable dogs, kept by persons who have no proper accommodation for them.

Regarding medicine in the coming time, my opinion is that the tendency will be toward simplicity in prescribing. Our trouble is that we have too many drugs. I could wish that half of them were eliminated from the British pharmacopoeia. Where we have ten drugs possessing the same or similar action, two or three of the most reliable only might be retained, and this would leave room for some of the most useful of the new remedies which were submitted to us by my predecessor in this chair last year, when he gave us a demonstration of his most valuable treatise on "Materia Medica." Regarding the curative action of drugs I suppose we are all agreed. The study of disease and the adaptation of remedies is a science which is at once noble and humane. It is divine as well as human, and it is likely to exist as long as man remains in this world and subject to the infirmities which have been inflicted by sin. There are some who profess to despise the use of drugs. It is of such that Byron wrote—

"Physicians mend or end us,
Secundum, artem; but although we sneer
In health, when sick we call them to attend us,
Without the least propensity to jeer."

Drugs are not the only, nor indeed the chief, weapons with which we at present combat disease. The cook is now held in nearly as high esteem as the dispenser. Ever since our countryman's epitaph was written, "He fed fevers," there has been a growing disposition to sustain nature while wrestling with disease. Strength, growth, and existence ever are conditions depending on food. Hence the food question is one which demands the best attention of medical men. Part of the Hippocratic oath was, "I will prescribe such a course of regimen as may be best suited to the condition of my patients according to the best of my power and judgment, seeking to preserve them from anything that might prove injurious."

The question of food is not more important from a medical point of view than that of drink, and it would seem that from a popular standpoint it is not

nearly so important. For every eating-house there must be ten drinking saloons. In Belfast there are 900 houses licensed to sell drink. The best of all drink is water. Unfortunately, water pure and abundant is a blessing which is not always possessed by the people of this country. Belfast with only twelve days' supply of water in its reservoirs is alarming enough. If alcohol is to be imbibed, it should be pure and matured. I am not going to open up the drink controversy here, although drink is the largest factor in the medical man's practice but will content myself by denouncing strong drink as man's strongest enemy. By it more fortunes are wasted, more homes blighted, more lives ruined, than by any other agency. It is quite true that—

"War has slain its thousands,
And plague its thousands ten,
But drink has slain its millions
Of the very best of men."

Of the medicinal value of alcohol this Society formerly expressed its opinion. Alcohol is a powerful weapon in combating many a severe illness, but there its use should end, and there our recommendation of it should cease.

The annual rent-charge in Ireland is £9,000,000. The drink bill is £15,000,000. There is an agitation for a reduction in the rent-roll which the Government promise to accomplish next year, when every Irishman will thenceforward rank freeholder of the soil he tills. What will be the Irishman's answer as to the reduction of the £15,000,000? If the Irishman would retain these millions in his purse it would change "pauper, peasant, and patriot" into loyal, prosperous, and peaceable citizens. Temperance in all things, with a sufficient supply of wholesome food, would in a generation or two change the physical, moral, and mental condition of society.

The Sandwich Islanders believe that all the strength of their slain enemies enters into themselves. As a profession it is desirable that all the strength that lies in the enemies against whom we contend — bad food, impure water, alcoholic abuse, insufficient and unsuitable clothing, vitiated air, imperfect drainage, and the consequent living organisms which make havoc among the people — shall be used by us as a reserve force in making still greater progress in the field of medical science. Napoleon fought sixty battles; each victory was a new weapon. "Conquest has made me — conquest must maintain me," said the great General, and such should be our motto in the battle with disease — each victory a new weapon, every success adding the strength of a slain enemy. Our contest is not like that of Hercules,

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who conquered “whether he sat, or stood, or walked, or whatever he did.” It is a contest rather after the manner of Harvey, and Hunter, and Jenner – men who wrote their names in the book of discovery, by steady, and silent, and deep communings with nature, in the fields of observation and experiment.

We live in a most remarkable age. At no time in the world’s history has half a century witnessed so many changes of a character beneficial to man; adding to his comfort and convenience in railway travelling, ocean sailing, gas, and electric lighting, in telegraphic and telephone communication. Yet it has left our houses unaltered in construction – the main element of danger being still retained on the first landing. There is a tendency towards improvement in matters of ventilation and sewerage, and I think it is unlikely that in this country we shall again experience epidemics of the magnitude of the past. All the severer forms of plague, pestilence, and fevers, with all contagious diseases, are within measurable distance of being stamped out. The ills which the medical man of the future will have to contend with will be of a more refined and subtle character – diseases of the digestive and nervous systems, induced by the greater strain required to carry on the business of the world, in an age of keen competition, much disappointment, and immense tear and wear of brain substance.

I am confident that the members of this old historic Society of ours will keep abreast of the times, and in the future as in the past work to leave both the world and the profession better than they found them; so that while in the world political and commercial the word passes, “Demos is king,” it may be said in the world scientific and professional “Medicus is king.”