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DISCOURSE

ON

SELF-LIMITED DISEASES.

DELIVERED BEFORE

THE MASSACHUSETTS MEDICAL SOCIETY,

AT THEIR ANNUAL MEETING, MAY 27, 1835.

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BOSTON:
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Key passages

This deficiency of the healing art is not justly attributable to any want of sagacity or diligence on the part of the medical profession. It belongs rather to the inherent difficulties of the case, and is, after abating the effect of errors and accidents, to be ascribed to the apparent fact, that certain morbid processes in the human body have a definite and necessary career, from which they are not to be diverted by any known agents, with which it is in our power to oppose them. To these morbid affections, the duration of which, and frequently the event also, are beyond the control of our present remedial means, I have, on the present occasion, applied the name of *Self-limited diseases*; and it will be the object of this discourse to endeavor to show the existence of such a class, and to inquire how far certain individual diseases may be considered as belonging to it.

By a self-limited disease, I would be understood to express one which receives limits from its own nature, and not from foreign influences; one which, after it has obtained foothold in the system, cannot, in the present state of our knowledge, be eradicated, or abridged, by art,—but to which there is due a certain succession of processes, to be completed in a certain time; which time and processes may vary

with the constitution and condition of the patient, and may tend to death, or to recovery, but are not known to be shortened, or greatly changed, by medical treatment.

These expressions are not intended to apply to the palliation of diseases, for he who turns a pillow, or administers a seasonable draught of water to a patient, palliates his sufferings ; but they apply to the more important consideration of removing diseases themselves through medical means.

The existence of a class of diseases, like those under consideration, is, to a certain extent, already admitted, both by the profession, and the public ; and this admission is evinced by the use of certain familiar terms of expression. Thus, when people speak of a 'settled disease,' or of the time of 'the run of a disease,' it implies, on their part, a recognition of the law, that certain diseases regulate their own limits and period of continuance.

It is difficult to select a perfectly satisfactory or convincing example of a self-limited disease from among the graver morbid affections, because in these affections, the solicitude of the practitioner usually leads him to the employment of remedies, in consequence of which, the effect of remedies is mixed up with the phenomena of disease, so that the mind has difficulty in separating them. [Note A.] We must therefore seek for our most striking or deci-

sive examples among those diseases which are sufficiently mild, not to be thought to require ordinarily the use of remedies, and in which the natural history of the disease may be observed, divested of foreign influences. Such examples are found in the vaccine disease, the chicken pox, and the salivation produced by mercury. These are strictly self-limited diseases, having their own rise, climax, and decline, and I know of no *medical* practice which is able, were it deemed necessary, to divert them from their appropriate course, or hasten their termination. [Note B.]

It may appear to some, that the distinction of these diseases from others, is the old distinction of acute and chronic. Yet on due inquiry, such an identification is not found to be sustained, for there are some acute diseases which, we have reason to believe, are shortened by the employment of remedies; while on the other hand, certain chronic cases of disease are known to get well spontaneously, after years of continuance.

If the inquiry be made, why one disease has necessary limits, while another is without them, the reply is not uniform, nor always easy to be made.