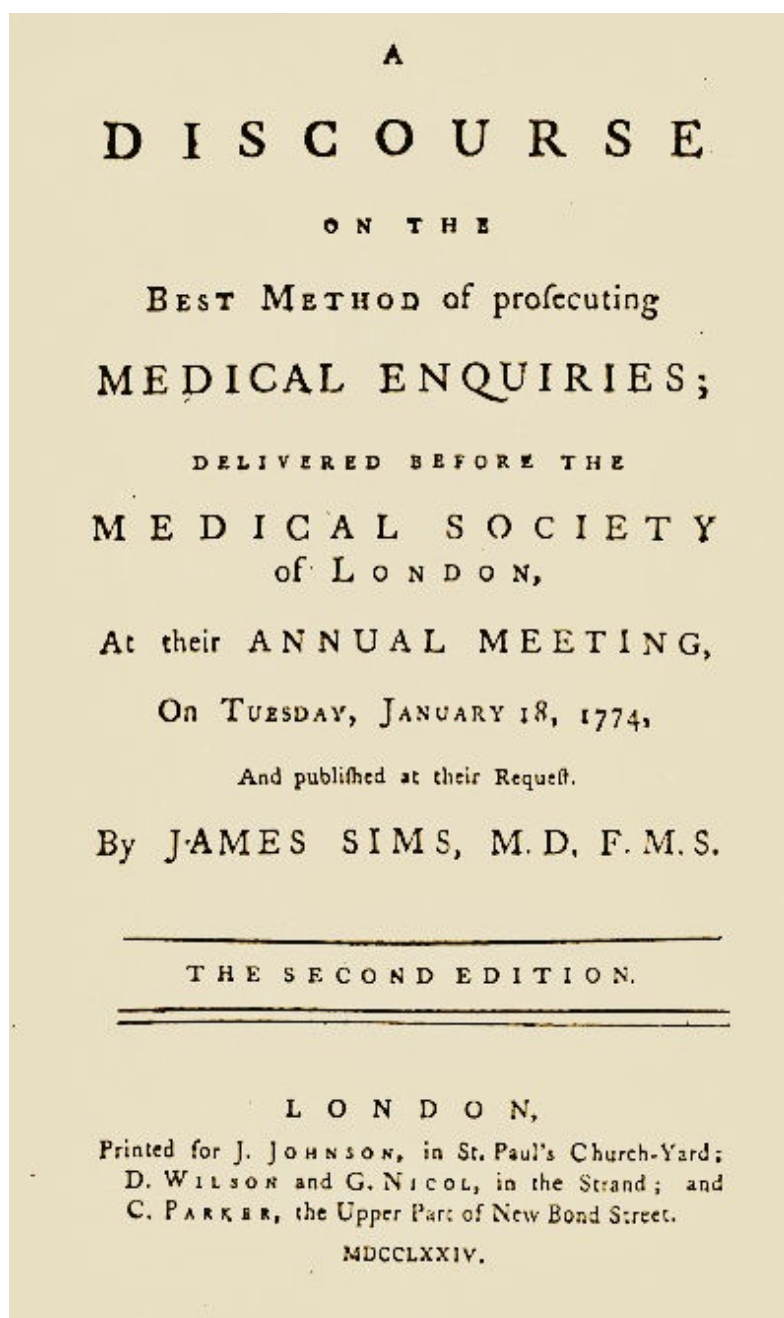


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Sims J (1774). A discourse on the best methods of prosecuting medical enquiries. London: J Johnson, p78-9, 80, 86-88, 99-101.

Title pages



Key passages

GENTLEMEN,

TO demonstrate the means of improving so comprehensive a science as medicine, and, by shewing the present state of our knowledge and ignorance *, to lead the way to future improvement, is a task equal to the highest abilities.

*. The *Novum Organum* of lord Verulam, wherein the desiderata of philosophy are pointed out, was perhaps the boldest design ever successfully executed by human ingenuity.

Few there are indeed, even of those that publish their dictates to the world, who know upon what ground our opinion of of any particular practice should be built; most having first taken it up from system, persevere in it afterwards because the majority of their patients do not die; never reflecting that it is sometimes probable more would not have perished had they totally abstained from medicine, nor ever comparing the success of those who practise in an opposite way to their own. Besides, many epidemic disorders are so little dangerous, that scarcely one perishes of all those who are treated in as different methods as possible; thereby giving credit with the inattentive to every trifling remedy, or even to such as at another period may prove highly destructive. We should not ascribe to our treatment all the persons who recover under it; the surplus only of

those who are preserved in following it, above the number who survive without any medical assistance, in the same disorder, and at the same time, are fairly to be placed to its account. Hence the great importance of comparison is obvious in our science. But of all these circumstances the true theorist is * almost regardless, and whilst his mind should be taken up with the minutest investigation of what passes around him, he retires within himself to search into abstruse causes, and invent arguments from thence in support of his practice, as if a knowledge of diseases were only to be gained in the closet.

I might ask, have we remedied fevers, apoplexies, or consumptions, better on account of knowing the circulation of the blood, or the anatomy of the head and lungs. The business of a physician is to cure, remedies are therefore of more use to him than reasons, the latter being safely left to the philosophers who have nothing else to do.

* I do not mean throughout this discourse to misrepresent theorists in the same manner they have commonly done empiricism, by saying that they entirely reject facts and experience from their scheme; but only to shew how little deference they pay to any, excepting such as tend to support their system.

We have for upwards of two thousand years been throwing away the time and pains of the medical world to find out the hidden cause of a fever, yet that empiric who first taught us the use of the bark, did more real service to mankind, than ten thousand ingenious men with all their theories.

The idea of a system precludes all future improvement in any science, inasmuch as it supposes a perfection in our knowledge, which is far from being the case in medicine: besides, it misleads us from the only useful part of the study, an attention to facts. The boldness and conceit with which systems fill young minds is inconceivable, and the injury done to the health of mankind proportionably great. No sooner is a physician loosed from the trammels of a college, than, convinced of the infallibility of theory, he begins to prescribe with as much confidence as if he knew the hidden causes, and could cure all disorders. Does bad success most frequently attend his practice, still some small error, or omission in the patient is found out, to which, and not to his management, the continuance of the disorder is ascribed;

Theory might have perhaps been profitable, if only used as the servant of practice; but, unluckily, as soon as it gets footing in the house, it becomes a most insolent director, turning out of doors all such facts as it cannot associate with, and telling its master that he must not see with his own eyes.

Observation has not only the trouble of shewing us what is proper, but also of pointing out what opinions and practices arising from theory, are improper and injurious. What difficulty has there been to combat the warm regimen in the small pox, because it was supposed to throw out morbid matter? The same may be said of the present practice in malignant fevers, and perhaps the plague.

If what I have said has any weight, it will appear, that the empiric has every advantage which theory can boast from reading and observation, without all those caprices, that are by some dignified with the title of superior knowledge *, understanding, and judgment; the way therefore to improve the art cannot be difficult, being simply that of empiricism, by which I mean experience; for quackery I despise, and most of all theoretical quackery, which is often the art of speaking without a meaning, and seeming learned without common sense.

Let us then view theory and empiricism; both endeavouring to obtain our approbation; but by very different means. The former boldly parading in all the tinsel drefs of fancy; varying her charms to suit the taste of every beholder; promising to her votaries the giddy admiration of all the young, thoughtless, and inexperienced; offering us present fame without laborious

* See Percival, Ess. Dogm.

study, and powerful support in all the errors of our judgment, or most excentric wanderings of our imagination; committing all her former admirers to oblivion, in order to make way for us. See at the same time her right hand red with the blood of myriads sacrificed to that obstinacy with which she follows her opinions for the day, though perhaps to change them on the next. Observe her parent pride, and the insignificant medicines her children, together with the caprices her train, as numerous as the blades of grass in the field, and as various as the flowers that enamel it; all shielded with self-conceit, against the attacks of truth, and armed with the sharpest ridicule, against those who will not comply with her desires.

View on the other hand empiricism, with her slow and modest step, scarcely obtruding herself to our eyes, much less to our admiration; using no meretricious caresses to entice us; promising no immediate reputation, nor emoluments, but ra-

ther the contrary; unfolding to us the records of ages, which, by a tedious application of many years, we must become masters of, in order to obtain her favour; telling us that we must, like the industrious bee, select honey, even from amidst the poison of theoretical writings; offering us no shield but an approving mind, against the slander, and what is more grievous, the contempt of the world, misguided by her rival; proposing to us a life of application, care, and pains, without reward or glory, until we shall cease to be sensible of them, if even then, in conjunction with time and truth, she shall fortunately be able to do us justice. The choice is then in us, and may we, scorning the artful blandishments of theory, attach ourselves only to experience, sensible that in so doing, we shall best fulfil all our duties, as useful physicians and good men.

F I N I S.