

Home

Contents

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## Records

Title Page(s)   Key Passage(s)   Context

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**Gregory J (1772)**. Lectures on the duties and qualifications of a physician. London: Strahan and Cadell.

**Title pages**

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L E C T U R E S

*Collegii* ON THE *Regii*

Duties and Qualifications

*Medicor.* OF A *Edinburg.*

P H Y S I C I A N .

*N. i. 44.*

By JOHN GREGORY, M. D. F. R. S.

Physician to His MAJESTY, and Professor of Medicine  
in the University of Edinburgh.

A NEW EDITION, corrected and enlarged.

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L O N D O N :

Printed for W. STRAHAN; and T. CADELL, in the Strand.

MDCCLXXII.

## LECTURE V.

*Error in supposing the laws of Nature to be fewer and simpler than they really are.—Natural dispositions of men influence their literary character.—Exemplified in those of lively and warm imaginations, and in those who are calm, sedate, and discriminating.—Bad consequences of a fondness for the Marvellous.—Abuses in the study of natural history.—Causes that have retarded the advancement of the sciences.—*  
1. *Inattention to their end, viz. the convenience and happiness of life.—2. Useless subtlety which may be displayed in different ways—too scrupulous regard to arrangement.—Observations on the subject of arrangement.—3. Credulity.—4. Attachment to great names.—5. Blind admiration of antiquity.—6. Fondness of novelty.—7. Hasty reduction of the sciences into systems.—8. Too great attention to elegance of language, or an affected obscurity of style.—The study of Lord Bacon's writings recommended.*

The advancement of the sciences has been much retarded, by the following causes.

1. One of the chief causes \* has been an inattention to the principal end of their cultivation; that is, public utility, or what contributes to the convenience and happiness of life.

Perhaps no science has suffered so much as medicine by the neglect of its true end, which, as I before

observed, is to preserve health, to prolong life, and to cure diseases. It has, indeed, made the slowest progress of any of the useful and practical arts; not so much from any deficiency of genius, as from a misapplication of it; nor yet from want of learning, for no profession can boast of more men eminent in every branch of useful and polite literature. Physicians have not only successfully cultivated every science connected with their own profession; such as anatomy, botany, chymistry, and the various branches of natural history, but have often distinguished themselves as poets, mathematicians, and philosophers. Yet how few physicians can we name, who, either by their genius or industry, have advanced the practical part of their own profession! how many, on the contrary, could we name, who have corrupted it, by the theories of their own imaginations, and even checked the slow improvement, which time naturally brings to every art founded on observation and experience!

2. There is a certain metaphysical subtlety, which is not only useless in our enquiries into nature, but does real mischief, by giving genius and industry a wrong direction.

From the days of Galen, till the middle of the last century, all the institutions of physic were not only filled with the doctrine of elements and temperaments, but with enquiries, Whether the procuring of health be the design or end of medicine? whether disease is a quality or relation? and such like. They were generally disputes

about words; and whenever the terms were defined, the controversy was at an end. It is really melancholy to reflect on the industry, erudition, and often genius, that was wasted in such disputes as disgrace the human understanding, and was employed in corrupting an art, that more requires attentive and sagacious observation, than metaphysics, to bring it to perfection.

An useless subtlety may be displayed in two ways; either in the prosecution of enquiries of no importance, but of difficult investigation, or by treating important subjects in a way that leads only to fruitless speculation and controversy. We have examples of the first in the old school-logic, and in most metaphysical disquisitions, ancient or modern. I acknowledge the usefulness of such, considered as an exercise for young minds.

The practice of balancing things with a finical precision, is unfavourable to the enlarged views of genius, the advancement of the sciences, and the successful management of business in private life. These require only an attention to probabilities, to leading principles, and to the great outlines of objects, a quick discernment where the greatest probability of success lies, and habits of acting, in consequence of this, with facility and vigour.

The want of clear and precise definitions has been the cause of much confusion and disputation in medicine, as well as in other branches of science, abstract mathematics excepted. It seems now to be agreed, that it is most convenient, on the whole, to define the genera of diseases by a simple enumeration of such symptoms as are most constantly present, as are obvious to the senses, and which serve to distinguish them from others which they most resemble. Definitions of diseases ought not to include any hypotheses in relation to their proximate causes, nor should they at all point at such hypotheses; otherwise physicians, unless their opinions of proximate causes are the same, can never agree in annexing the same ideas to the same words.

Let me take this opportunity of recommending to your serious study the writings of Lord Bacon, who of all men possessed, perhaps, the most enlarged and penetrating genius. He has explained the method of acquiring knowledge, and promoting science, with incomparable judgment and perspicuity.

## LECTURE VI.

*Peculiar disadvantages under which medicine has laboured.—Inconveniencies attending the method in which it has been usually taught, entirely from the lectures of professors, or from books.—The advantages of a regular attendance on the sick, during the whole time in which a physician is studying his profession, particularly specified.—Duties of a professor of medicine.—Inconveniencies arising from the absolute confinement of the study and practice of physic to a class of men who live by it as a profession.—Advantages of laying the art open, and of gentlemen of science and abilities, who are not of the profession, studying it as an interesting branch of philosophy.—Attempt to shew that this would tend to promote the interests of humanity, by diffusing the benefits of the art; that it would facilitate the improvement of medicine; that it would most effectually support the dignity of the profession, and secure the success of every individual belonging to it, in proportion to his real merit.—Conclusion.*

For the conveniency of teaching medicine, it has been usual to adopt the synthetic plan; that is, to lay down general principles, especially such as relate to the proximate causes of diseases, and the mode of operation of remedies, and to mention facts so far only as they serve to illustrate those principles, or as they are clearly deducible from them. Medicine like—

... FROM WHICH MEDICINE HER-  
wife, as usually taught in universities, instead of being represented as an art imperfect in its most material branches, instead of having its deficiencies pointed out, with a view to their being supplied, is digested into a regular and seemingly perfect system. In this light it is beheld by the student, who embraces hypotheses with the same facility and unsuspecting confidence as he would do facts established on the testimony of his senses; he imagines he understands the causes of all diseases, and the manner in which remedies act in removing them; his mind is at ease in having always firm principles to rest on. But how fallacious these principles have generally been, is sufficiently evinced in the history of medicine, which shews that they have been constantly fluctuating.

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our uncertainty in regard to these circumstances, the indications of cure become likewise uncertain; that there is no proof of the remedies acting in the manner which had been supposed; and that, perhaps, some of those remedies, though in repute for many ages in the cure of such diseases, have either no effect at all, or at least none in the doses commonly given.

A student, however, is seldom aware of the fallacious nature of such hypothetical structures, as he is a stranger to the circumstances on which they are founded. They appear plausible, well connected, and are particularly grateful, as they tend to conceal the difficulties of the profession.

Medicine has little chance of acquiring improvement from a physician educated in the faith of systems, because he scarcely supposes it admits of any. He treats his patients according to the established rules, and when they die, he is satisfied that every thing was done for them that art could do. It might be supposed that enlarged experience, and the riper exercise of his understanding, would remove his prejudices; but a little acquaintance with mankind shews, that early and strong impressions are with great difficulty erased; every circumstance that tends to confirm them, is readily attended to, while every one that tends to weaken them, is overlooked or ingeniously explained away; so that time seems frequently to confirm his errors.

It is, indeed, difficult and painful for men to give up favourite opinions, and to sink from a state of security and confidence into one of suspense and scepticism. Accordingly we find that physicians do not easily change the principles they first set out with.

Let me take this opportunity of doing justice to the merit of several gentlemen, who have, within these few years, done honour to this medical college by their inaugural dissertations. In these, several important investigations have been carried on, by a set of accurate and well-conducted experiments, under the direction of my learned and ingenious colleagues. This method of giving a specimen of a young physician's genius, is attended with so many advantages, is so creditable to himself, and so useful to the public, that I should be extremely sorry to see it fall again into disuse.

It were to be wished, that ingenious men would devote half the time to the study of nature, which they usually give to that of opinions.

Such judges, not fettered by early prejudices, unawed by authority, and unbiassed by interest, would canvass with freedom all the commonly received principles of medicine, and expose the uncertainty of many of those maxims of which a physician dares not seem to doubt.

A physician, amidst the necessary duties and anxieties of an extensive practice, has little leisure to attend to any subject that is not directly connected with his business; nor does he always possess that tranquillity of mind which is so requisite in every kind of investigation, and particularly in planning and conducting a train of experiments. Lord Bacon had as enlarged views in medicine, of its deficiencies, and of the proper method of supplying them, as perhaps any physician who ever wrote. Dr. Hales has been one of its greatest benefactors, by his discoveries, by the openings he made in different branches of the science, which have since been further prosecuted, but principally by the excellent example he set of ingenious and accurate experimental investigation.

But not to insist further on arguments to shew, that there is less reason to expect improvements in our profession, while it continues on its present narrow footing, I shall only observe, that it appears from the history of physic, that the improvements in the practical parts of it, have seldom been owing to those who valued themselves upon being regular, systematic, rational practitioners; nay, what is more extraordinary, such improvements have been often opposed by them with keenness and acrimony, and seldom adopted till after a long struggle. I could give instances of this in the case of blisters, opiates, Peruvian bark, antimony,

mercurey, inoculation of the small-pox; and I may add, the cool regimen in fevers. Many important discoveries re-

lating to the cure of diseases, have been made by accident; and some valuable remedies have been communicated to us by the natives of America, and other illiterate nations. But, till of late, it would be difficult to point out many solid improvements in practice which have been the result of reasoning, or of any regular train of observations or experiments. On the contrary, the merits of the improvements that have been offered to the world, and which appealed for their justness to experience, have been usually adopted, not upon repeated and more accurate trials, but upon the authority of great names, or from the prevailing philosophy of the times.

There has been much reason to complain, that the discoveries of those men, who were not of the medical faculty, have not been always examined with that candor, which their importance and success required. Yet from such men very substantial improvements may sometimes be expected. Even quacks possess some advantages in their practice beyond regular physicians, as they seldom can suffer much, either in their interest or reputation, from the bad success of their experiments. But they have another advantage above the regular physician, from having more extensive practice. I grant, however, that the ignorance and inattention of most of these men, makes them profit but little, in proportion to what might be expected from their experience, and unfettered practice; and I own too, that little regard can be had to their veracity, in their accounts of cures. But it is a physician's duty, to search for knowledge from all sources, however

impure and contemptible; and he may avail himself of that experience, which the empiric himself is neither able nor willing to turn to account.

The knowledge of these last mentioned branches, should be drawn from medical writers of distinguished sagacity, accuracy, and candour; but, above all, from observation and experience, the purest and least fallible source of medical science. He may derive singular advantages from the conversation of an ingenious and experienced physician, who is able to direct his studies, to distinguish between genuine and pretended facts, and, amidst the load of learned rubbish with which medicine is encumbered, to select what is truly useful.

The objection to laying medicine open to the world like other sciences, from its tendency to multiply quacks, and to lessen the authority of the physician, is not well founded. It is not possible to confine the practice entirely to regular physicians. Cases are continually occurring of people labouring under diseases, who can have no access to the assistance of one of the faculty.

If, by withholding this assistance, every disease, where a physician was not consulted, was to be left to nature alone, physicians would have a plausible excuse for keeping the world in ignorance; because it might be alleged, that more diseases would be cured by the efforts of unassisted nature, than by the random management of people imperfectly instructed in medicine. But, in

reality, this is never the case in diseases of any consequence. I shall give an example, in the general treatment of fevers in the lower class of people, when they are deprived of medical assistance.

Patients are so far from being left to nature, when no physician is called, that they are commonly oppressed with a succession of infallible cures recommended by quacks, or their weak and officious friends.

I hope I have advanced no opinions in these Lectures that tend to lessen the dignity of a profession which has always been considered as most honourable and important. But, I apprehend, this dignity is not to be supported by a narrow, selfish, corporation-spirit; by self-importance; a formality in dress and manners, or by an affectation of mystery. The true dignity of physic is to be maintained by the superior learning and abilities of those who profess it, by the liberal manners of gentlemen, and by that openness and candour, which disdain all artifice, which invite to a free inquiry, and thus boldly bid defiance to all that illiberal ridicule and abuse to which medicine has been so much and so long exposed.

**F I N I S.**