

Editorial (1909). The reporting of unsuccessful cases. Boston Medical and Surgical Journal 161:263-263.

Whole Article

263

THE BOSTON
Medical and Surgical Journal.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 19, 1909

A Journal of Medicine, Surgery and Allied Sciences, published at Boston, weekly, by the undersigned.

SUBSCRIPTION TERMS: \$5.00 per year, in advance, postage paid, for the United States, Canada and Mexico; \$6.50 per year for all foreign countries belonging to the Postal Union.

All communications for the Editor, and all books for review, should be addressed to the Editor of the Boston Medical and Surgical Journal, 707 Paddock Building, 101 Tremont Street, Boston.

All letters containing business communications, or referring to the publication, subscription or advertising department of this Journal, should be addressed to the undersigned.

Remittance should be made by money order, draft or registered letter payable to

D. C. HEATH & COMPANY,
120 BOYLSTON STREET, BOSTON, MASS.

THE REPORTING OF UNSUCCESSFUL CASES.

It is somewhat proverbial that medical literature abounds in publications of successful results, particularly from the therapeutic standpoint. It is natural that men should be eager to present to the world their successes rather than their failures, and furthermore, that a certain over-enthusiasm should see results where none actually exist. It is not to be questioned, therefore, that many papers are continually appearing written with an entirely conscientious motive, but which present an

exaggerated or wholly distorted statement of the actual facts. This is notably true in the exploitation of new remedies and of new forms of treatment of recognized diseases. In the hands of one man certain drugs or combinations of drugs or other therapeutic measures apparently attain results which are absolutely incapable of verification at the hands of other equally conscientious investigators. Doctors, unfortunately, are no more completely endowed with the judicial faculty than persons in other walks of life, and it is certainly not strange that distortions of facts, put out with apparent scientific accuracy, are everywhere in evidence. The situation would be the more unfortunate were it not for the fact that a certain healthy skepticism serves continually as an offset to over-enthusiasm. The result is that many discussions occur and controversies are raised which have small permanent significance and which yield nothing of value in the search for ascertained truth.

In view of this very general and, in certain respects it must be admitted, praiseworthy enthusiasm to ventilate new theories and exploit new methods, it would be well if leaders in the profession gave more attention to the publication of their mistakes and failures. Certainly there is no

more valuable lesson to the practitioner than a complete realization of his errors. In fact, by this means alone is further knowledge possible. In spite, however, of the manifest truth of this statement, it is relatively rare that surgeons or physicians publish detailed reports of their mistakes and of the lessons which these mistakes inculcate. We too commonly see reports of "so many successful cases," with a certain inevitable emphasis on the word "successful." Such papers naturally have their value and also their manifest dangers. The ease of certain surgical procedures is, for example, greatly exaggerated in the minds of less trained practitioners through the report of a large series of successful operations. A certain false security is thereby encouraged, to the end that operations of significance are no doubt performed by really incompetent persons. There is unquestionably a false emphasis in all such publications, tending to increase the reputation of the writer, but not to render the public more secure. We have no proper balance to this very natural tendency to publish our successes except through the more frequent publication of the errors and failures which likewise mark the path of every successful practitioner. Such papers, written by men of experience and standing, would do much toward overcoming the tendency to over-security and would certainly serve an educational purpose which the ordinary publication so often fails to attain. No greater benefit could be secured for the medical public than a series of papers illustrating the dangers and pitfalls of medical practice, written by men to whom the actual experience has come.

