THE HISTORICAL APPROACH TO MEDICINE.

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"The history of a science is the science itself."—Goethe.

The student of medicine commences his studies with subjects which, though they have, for him, no direct bearing on medicine, give him the satisfactory feeling of studying "science." Later he is literally overwhelmed by the necessity of acquiring the facts of anatomy, physiology, pathology and bacteriology which are to form the foundations of his future studies. He is here still in the realms of science.

On reaching his clinical studies, when at last he has, so to say, got his teeth into the meat of his future profession, a mental revolution takes place. He passes from the study of science to the practice of art. The student has now to deal with human material—all too human, as Nietzsche so insistently pointed out. No longer does he work in a laboratory of "facts," but in a world of frankly admitted opinion—often distressingly conflicting opinions. No longer are matters weighed upon a balance, but by means of a mystical "clinical sense." The conformity of the laboratory is gone and the human element, which was previously kept as much as possible in the background, is now given free rein.

The student reacts to the new situation in various ways. He may despair at the seeming regression from the world of science, or comfort himself with the words of Spencer, that all practice is in the nature of science. He may accept the change with phlegmatic matter of factness, or he may not even notice any change. In any event he is usually unprepared for it. Something is lacking which makes orientation more difficult, and causes more despair than need be. What is lacking is a background to clinical medicine—a background of medical history. "By the historical method alone," said Osler, "can many problems in medicine be approached profitably."

The history of medicine forms an essential part of the science of medicine. It takes the student far beyond any immediate needs into a world of the past where "through the centuries the scholars, heroes, prophets, saints and martyrs of medical science have worked and fought and died" to free mankind from the afflictions of body and mind; to overthrow superstition and to conquer that most recalcitrant and obnoxious enemy of human reason—human credulity. And the student returns to the problem at hand with a better understanding and better equipped to tackle them.

The history of medicine is a vital and inspiring subject. Forming as it does a part of the history of science it is the bridge which leads the medical practitioner out of the narrow specialism into which he is inclined to fall, into the wider world of science. It is far more relevant to the understanding of the development of mankind, the story of civilisations and the evolution of the human mind, than the pageantry of kings, the scheming of dignitaries and the ambitions of generals, which fill the pages of conventional history. The history of medicine deals with the greatest and meanest of the land; with kings and popes, peasants and labourers; with saints and scoundrels; honest men and humbugs. It is the embodiment of the hopes and fears of men, springing as it does from their folkways and superstitions on the one hand, and their labour and search for truth on the other. If there is anything which is calculated to give the medical man a broad and liberal outlook (so rare nowadays), and a philosophy worthy of his profession, it is the story of that profession. In the words of Karl Sudoff, "medical history is unquestionably the best school of medical ethics."

No systematic course in medical history is held at this Medical School, and what instruction is given is casual and inadequate. It would be perhaps too much to suggest that a systematic course of lectures on the history of medicine be added to the already crowded curriculum (although many German and American schools have done so without any obvious detriment to their students and with apparently much success).

But perhaps it may not be too much to hope that there are sufficient students in this Medical School interested enough to form some sort of historical discussion club. If, as too recent abortive attempts to form such a club seem to show, the bulk of our medical students are anaesthetic to the cultural and ethical demands of their future profession, then it is a grievous thing and grievously shall they answer for it.

To those who believe that the historical approach to medicine is not of sufficient practical importance to warrant very much attention, I would remind them of the warning of Nietzsche that "even the most gifted will only flounder in continual uncertainty, once the thread of historical development is snapped." Let them also ponder a little over the quotation from Goethe given above, and the following pregnant remark of Havelock Ellis: "The science of medicine is the natural history of man."