A Century of American Medicine, 1776-1876

Clarke Edward Hammond
A CENTURY
OF
AMERICAN MEDICINE.
1776—1876.

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE.

The following papers, during their publication in the "American Journal of the Medical Sciences," have met with commendation so general, that it has seemed due to the profession whose development for the last hundred years is here traced with so much fidelity, to place them in a form more convenient for future preservation and reference. Taken as a whole, they present a complete and connected review of the progress of medical science in America during the whole of the period in which medicine can be considered to be a science; and the volume, it is therefore hoped, will possess not only interest in the present, but an enduring value in the future.

Philadelphia, October, 1876.
PRACTICAL MEDICINE.

BY

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PRACTICAL MEDICINE.

When Boerhaave, the most accomplished and celebrated physician of the 18th century, died, he left behind him an elegant volume, the title-page of which declared that it contained all the secrets of medicine. On opening the volume every page, except one, was blank. On that one was written, "keep the head cool, the feet warm, and the bowels open." This legacy of Boerhaave to suffering humanity typified, not inaptly or unjustly, the acquirements, not of medical science, but of medical art at the close of the 18th century. Empiricism, authority, and theory ruled the medical practice of the world at that time. The result of therapeutical experience from Hippocrates to Boerhaave was fairly summed up by the latter in the eleven words we have just quoted. To quiet the nervous system, to equalize the circulation, to provide for the normal action of the intestinal canal, and to leave all the rest to the vis medicatrix naturae was sound medical treatment, and it was as far as a sound therapeutics had gone a hundred years ago. This goal had been reached by empiricism. Wise practitioners like Boerhaave, Sydenham, Morgagni, and a few others, were content to restrain their materia medica within these modest limits. The vast majority of practitioners, however, either blindly followed

1 The author desires to acknowledge his indebtedness to Dr. R. H. Fitz, Assistant Professor of Pathological Anatomy in Harvard University, for invaluable aid in collecting many of the data upon which this essay is founded.
authority of the past, and bled and dosed by the book, or
adopted some strange theory of planetary influence, signa-
tures, animal spirits, or occult force, and treated disease in
accordance with whatever theory they chanced to believe in.
Medical practice, as a rule, deserved the ridicule of Molière
and the satire of Montaigne.

In making these statements we do not forget that there
had been real progress in many departments of medical
science. Anatomy, physiology, surgery, chemistry, and
physics had made substantial conquests within their own
domains. We do not forget that Harvey had discovered
the circulation of the blood; that Haller, one of the greatest
names in medicine, had discerned the fact of muscular irri-
tability, and its connection with the nerves; that Albinus
had introduced thoroughness and exactness, so far as the
means and instruments of observation accessible to him
rendered them possible, into anatomical investigation; that
Morgagni had founded the science of pathological anatomy,
which has since yielded such magnificent results; that
Astruc in 1743 had announced the reflex phenomena of the
nervous system, which Prochaska before the close of the
century more fully developed; that Boerhaave, Sydenham,
Mead, Hoffmann, and Stahl had rendered good service to
practical medicine; that Franklin and others had brought
electricity, magnetism, and galvanism into the domains of
science, though their relations to medicine and physiology
were not then recognized; and that chemistry had entered
upon a career of investigation which it has since followed
with extraordinary success. But all these discoveries were
in the nature of isolated facts. They were more like islands,
surrounded by an unknown ocean, than like parts of a con-
tinent, intimately connected with each other and forming
portions of a grand and systematic whole.

In spite of these achievements, however, theory, empiri-
ceism, and authority ruled the medical world at the close of