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MORGAGNI, FATHER OF PATHOLOGY

By JAMES J. WALSH, M.D.

When the International Medical Congress met at Rome a generation ago, Virchow, the great German pathologist, was asked to make one of the three public addresses that initiated the Congress. Out of compliment to the Italians he took for his subject, Morgagni, whom he called the father of pathology. Virchow was only one of many men who about that time expressed themselves in very complimentary terms with regard to Morgagni. For instance, Benjamin Ward Richardson, who was as distinguished an English clinician as Virchow was a German pathologist, said with regard to Morgagni's work on "The Seats and Causes of Disease":

"To this day no medical scholar can help being delighted as well as instructed by the study of this wonderful book. To move into it from the midst of a body of current, that is contemporary, medical literature, is like passing from the periodical flux of current general literature to the perusal of a Shakespearean drama or the *Pilgrim's Progress* or *Paradise Lost*. It is a transition from the mediocrity of incessant repetition of well-known truth told in long and halting terms back to descriptions derived direct from nature and fresh from her treasury."

It is to Morgagni that we owe the first realization of minute connections between parts of the nervous system that provide the pathway to symptoms quite distant from the site of actual disease. In a word, he had realized the sig-

nificance of what we call reflexes and how much they mean for symptoms of various kinds even though there was no organic lesion or tissue change at the site of the symptom.

Morgagni's studies in aneurysm show how thoroughly he understood the mechanism of this serious pathological condition. He pointed out that the first noticeable disease change that occurs is the degeneration of the inner coat of the artery. The progress of these arterial changes is due to a large extent to blood pressure within the arteries. He felt, too, that blood pressure could be kept from being dangerously high by strict attention to diet. If aneurysms are discovered in early stages, he pointed out that the patient's life may well be prolonged by the simple measures of restricted diet and restricted subjection to emotional changes.

Medical practice owes to Morgagni the first effort to correct the evil custom of venesection. Practically every physician was of the opinion that if the patient had a fever he must be bled freely, and most other patients had as the beginning of their treatment the use of the lancet, so that when a century and a half ago they founded a medical journal in London, which still exists, they called it *The Lancet*. For almost a century after Morgagni's death in 1771 many American physicians

still bled people very freely as the beginning of their treatment.

Morgagni was a very hard worker but he lived to be nearly ninety and he did not publish his books until he was nearly eighty. He was very well liked by the profession and was looked up to as one of the most distinguished physicians alive in his day. His personal history is extremely interesting.

Morgagni married and had fifteen children, eight of whom survived their father though he lived to the ripe age of eighty-seven years. There were three sons, one of whom died in childhood; while another became a Jesuit and taught in the famous Jesuit school at Bologna, whose magnificent building has now become the municipal museum, the *Accademia delle Belle Arte*. The third followed his father's profession, married and settled in Bologna but died before his father, who then assumed the care of his grandchildren. All Morgagni's daughters who grew up to womanhood, eight in number, became nuns in various religious orders. Morgagni used to say that he rejoiced over their vocation because he was quite sure that they had chosen the better part and that their lives would be happier than under any other circumstances.

Morgagni was a great friend of the Popes of his time and was on terms of personal acquaintance with not less than five of

them. It was understood that whenever he came to Rome he was to be the guest of the Pope. Some of these Popes who were special friends of his are among the most influential pontiffs who ever occupied the Holy See. The great Benedict XIV, himself a native of Bologna, and an intimate friend of Morgagni, mentions the pathologist in terms of special commendation in his classic work, "The Beatification of the Servants of God."

Honors came to him, so that he was a foreign member of many of the most important scientific societies of Europe. The Royal Society of England elected him a Fellow in 1724. The Academy of Sciences of Paris made him a member in 1731. In 1735 the Imperial Academy of St. Petersburg conferred a like honor on him. In 1754 the Academy of Berlin elected him to honorary membership. His English biographer says quaintly that all the learned and great who came into Morgagni's neighborhood did not depart without a visit to him. He was in correspondence with most of the great men of his time, and the terms of intimate relationship thus revealed are the best evidence of the estimation in which Morgagni was held, especially by the prominent scientists of his time. Among them were such men as Ruysch, Boerhaave, Sir Richard Meade, Haller, and Meckel.