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Dissertation on empiricism

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XVII.

Dissertation
on
Empiricism.

By
Edward Phelps Lyman,
of Warren, Connecticut,
Candidate for the Degree of Doctor in Medicine.



A dissertation

on

Empiricism by

E. P. Lyman

On holding up the subject of quackery before the medical faculty, or the members of the medical profession, I need not tell them that it is an evil. Nor indeed should I need to tell the members of any other profession, that it is an evil in every thing except the science of medicine. Almost all, in theory, are ready to admit this, as a general principle, but, alas, how many are practically the patrons of quackery, when she puts on the air of sophistry, or the mantle of secrecy.

Of all the forms of quackery, medical quackery, is, in my opinion, by far the most pernicious and destructive. Yet she finds many more who are ready to become her willing rotaries when she puts on this form than under almost, indeed any, other form in which she has yet appeared before the public.

Many are ready to become its firm supporters and upholders, by employing a quack doctor, (even when their own lives, or the lives of their friends may be at stake) who, when speaking of the system of quackery, i.e. quackery as a whole, are ready to denounce it as a most baneful and pernicious thing. Thus in their theory they seem to be correct enough, but some

way or other, they fail in carrying it out in practice. They say one thing in word, but in action, O! how strangely different is their language. It would seem that they regard the subject of medicine in a different light from what they do any other profession; or any trade. They do not seem to consider, but that the most ignorant, and unlearned man, may be more skillful in curing diseases than the best educated physician. It would seem as if they thought that medical skill was not a thing to be learned by careful study and investigation, but rather, as it were, a sort of innate and instinctive property of certain individuals. Or, which is more probable, as I am inclined to believe, they do not wait to think much, if any thing, about it; but adopt at once, whatever absurdity is held out to them, however inconsistent it may be in itself.

Strange as this may appear to the members of the medical profession at first view; still we can readily see, how this may be the fact, when we consider how profoundly ignorant the public are, on the subject of medicine. Were the public possessed of only common sense, in medical matters, it would be aware also that medical quackery is an evil.

Quackery, and imposture, has existed in every profession and trade from the very origin of arts, and is, even now more extensive than ever before. As arts are more numerous, and extensive; so also is this system of fraud and deceit; seeming as it were, to grow with their growth, and strengthen with their strength. It has existed even in religion, from the very earliest ages. The priests were quacks and imposters, as is well known,

when they pretended to have influence on the skies, and to even hold the keys of heaven. And is not even now, the mask of sanctity sometimes worn by the hypocrite for the sake of obtaining his own selfish ends?

It exists also in the profession of law. Lawyers often urging their credulous clients to suits when none but themselves are the winners. Indeed in almost every lawsuit is not one party or the other deceived by the opinions of their legal advisers?

What trade is there indeed, among men, in which the inducements to quackery are at all alluring, into which she has not already crept, and in which she is not now exercising almost unlimited sway.

It has existed in medicine from its very infancy; from the time when the science of medicine was confined entirely to the priests; and exists in it now, to a still greater extent than ever before, even in the advanced state to which as a science it has now arrived. And probably will exist in it, as long as there are those who will suffer themselves to be duped by the ignorant and unprincipled, and as long as there is lucre obtained by duping them.

It is not to be expected that the public will be the best, or even very good judges, of medical skill and merit. From the very nature of the case this can not be the fact. Still it is not a little strange, that men should be able to make themselves believe, that the ignorant and unlearned quack who has nothing to recommend him to their confidence unless it be his impudence and self-sufficiency, can be so much superior in point of ^{medical} skill

to the regularly educated physician, who has made it his whole life's business to investigate the nature of disease, and by careful study and examination, endeavoured to find the most sure and safe method of alleviating them. This study and investigation of disease and remedies is absolutely necessary to the existence of a physician. For, I say, that man who prescribes merely from his own observation; without any knowledge of the science of medicine; and who prescribes merely to symptoms, practices empirically

No system of imposture, however great, is so absurd as not to find its votaries among some portion of the public. I may almost say, the more absurd the better, if it is only carried on with a sufficient degree of secrecy, or pomposity. "There is no secret nostrum however knavishly got up; no empirical pill so large; nor indeed is there any so infinitesimally small, but that there may be found some, yes many, whose gullibility is so constituted that they may be made to swallow down all of them, at different times, with equal ease, and indeed I may say, with almost equally good effects; (however diversified they may be in their nature) if only recommended by an ignorant and unlearned pretender to medical skill

Now this disposition to support quackery and imposture is by no means confined to the ignorant alone. We find this propensity to follow after something new, the love of the marvelous, almost equally developed in all classes and casts of society. It exists hardly less, in the most learned and scientific, those who stand at the head of the most learned professions; "the talented men and those in high places"

than among the unlearned, and less educated members of society

You will find the former as ready to swallow Matchless Senative and mustard seed pills, as the latter; and quite as ready to talk of the instantaneous and thrilling effects, which a quadrillionth of a grain of gold produces when received into their stomachs or of the thorough and beneficial change wrought in their constitution by the administration of some inert nostrum, (or at any rate something which would have been inert and useless if administered by a regular member of the profession). Nor are they less forward in publicly lauding and eulogizing the discoverer of so potent a remedy for alleviating human misery; and in recommending him to the patronage of the community, many of whom, like themselves, are made his dupes, perhaps in this very way. I think it is evident from the rapidly increasing support that is given to quackery in these illustrious days of Homeopathy and Mesmerism that the bump of credulity ~~must~~ ^{is} most enormously developed in the present Public's head. It would indeed appear, as one has said - that

"The pleasure is as great,

"Of being cheated, as to cheat"

I have attempted to show, that quackery is an evil, because it is a system of fraud and deceit. But it is not an evil simply in this respect. It is an evil because it fills the community with hosts of rogues and fools." It is also an evil, because it tends to create the very ills it feeds upon, and affecting to cure all diseases it produces, or perpetuates, many. And finally it is an evil because it gives the public incorrect ideas, of the operation

of certain drugs, and often renders it difficult, or even impossible, for the physician to administer in a particular case, some important remedy, on account of the prejudice which the individual himself or some of his friends may have acquired against it through the influence of a deceitful and avaricious empiric.

And thus abuses what is so requisite for the happiness of man; the art of medicine itself.

It is sometimes claimed by the advocates of quackery, that the antipathy which exists among medical men towards quacks and nostrum vendors, arises from a feeling of self-interest. That it is such a feeling as is common for men to have, towards those who are about to supersede them in practice, or rival them in popularity; and is therefore entirely of a pecuniary nature, say they. This I would deny entirely. For, if they were influenced, merely by feelings of self-interest; instead of attempting to suppress and put down, a system, which fosters the employment of drugs and medicines by ignorant and unlearned men, men entirely unacquainted with the nature of the drugs which they administer, or the constitutions of the individuals to whom they are administered, or of the stages, type of the diseases, &c. which they treat, they would rather lay hold of it, as one of the very means of accomplishing their selfish ends. If the faculty loose, and quackery gains, a particular case, is not ample compensation made; (so far as the pecuniary interest is concerned;) by the ill health, which quackery produces in hundreds, and the disposition to fly to physic which it generates

in thousands. In the end, do they not rather increase in a ten-fold proportion, the catalogue of the regular physicians patients? But if you answer the misguided follower of quackery with arguments like these, he will say on what ground then is this antipathy of yours founded? (for we know that such an antipathy does exist.) I would tell him, that it arises from a natural feeling of disgust, at a barefaced system of deceit, and humbug. A system which produces nothing good, (or at any rate very little if any thing) but on the other hand much, of evil. There is a natural feeling, in the heart of every man, which, unless his mind is influenced by the strongest motives towards wrong, fills him with horror, and disgust, whenever he is conscious of doing wrong himself, or whenever he witnesses wrong actions in others. And it is this natural feeling of aversion to wrong, that makes us feel contempt, and indignation, at these miscreants, who we see deceiving and injuring the public, by the most scandalous, and dishonest means. But while our feelings thus revolt at the wrongs of an injured public, they are at the same, time aggravated by the knowledge of the fact, that such practices tend to bring discredit, and dishonor, on the science we profess. Are not these then, ^{natural, and} sufficient, reasons, for indignation and resentment, - Reasons why these members of community should be regarded as enemies to the commonwealth, and nuisances to society. I wish that all party strifes and class quarrels, were as justifiable and as praiseworthy. †

I have frequently heard this remark, or these remarks made, in support of certain empirical persons, by some intelligent

members of society, but of course, those who were entirely ignorant of the science of medicine. Dr. "That Dr is the best who looses the least number of patients." And, again, "I think that a doctor (meaning by that any one who makes any pretensions to medical skill) whoever he may be or whatever theory he may adopt ought to have his pay, howmuchsoever he may require, if he only cures his patient" (that is I suppose if he does not prevent his getting well.)

With certain qualifications, this may be admitted as true. And first, that "that Dr is the best, who looses the least number of patients." other things being equal, must certainly be admitted as true, in as much as curing the patients is the whole object of medical science. It is indeed true, that the public have no other so good a test by which to judge of medical skill, and indeed it would seem that this might be a tolerably accurate one even in their hands, if rightly applied, and yet how strangely, are they often misled, in applying it. There are many qualifying circumstances, which ought to be taken into consideration, which the public know nothing about. Such for instance as the nature of the prevailing epidemic, and the difference in form, and malignancy, which it may assume in different situations, or the various modifications which it may undergo, in consequence of season, temperament, habit &c. All these and many other things are matters of no small moment, in deciding whether the loss of a larger proportion of patients in one, district, than in an other, is owing entirely to a want of skill in the physician or not. None but those who are thoroughly acquainted with the nature of diseases, their mode of treatment, and the various causes by which they

are modified, (which would constitute, as you see, a well educated physician) can rightly appreciate all these circumstances, and are therefore the only competent judges in these cases. Still the public have facts enough in their reach, which if properly put together and applied, might lead to a correct opinion in a great majority of cases. It is frequently said that in the end, public opinion always proves to be in the right of the matter. Now howsoever good a rule this may be, in other things than those pertaining to medical matters, it would certainly be a very poor one to go by in this. If a quack, loses a patient, there is always some very good reason why he did not cure this one. He was not called until it was too late to do any good, or until some regular physician had given some one of the mineral poisons, and thus put it out of his power to cure him, or until something else happens, which answers as a very good reason why the loss of this patient, should not be attributed to his want of skill. But if on the other hand the blundering empiric suffers a patient to get well, (not to say cures) who perhaps appeared to have some dangerous disease about him; how quick, will the news be spread to all parts of the town, of the unparalleled cure performed by Dr. — — — And ample employment, will be immediately afforded, both for the tongue of the tatter, and the ears of the credulous. One cure (if perchance it be a cure, and not an escape) performed in this way, will excite more wonder, and produce more praise of the Dr. — than a dozen cures of a similar complaint much more praiseworthy performed, by a regularly educated physician, who goes still and quietly about his own business, making it his whole object to cure his patients, and alleviate human misery as much as lies in his power, instead of merely seeking

his ^{own} personal interest and involvement. With regard to the second part of the proposition, that, "Drs. ought to have their pay" I can most cheerfully accede to this, and would wish that the public were always as ready to act up to this principle in practice, as they are to admit it in theory. All that he may require say they: I too would say, that Drs. should be paid all that they may require, when they require no more than a reasonable compensation. "Whoever he may be &c." Whoever he may be, if he is a man worthy of the patronage of the public, and competent to assume the guardianship of public health, "his reasonable bills, certainly should be paid without murmuring". And if he is not but if on the other hand, he is merely a selfish pretender to the science in which he professes to be so profoundly skillfull, I need hardly say, the pay will come some way or other. For it is found to be the fact, that those who are most apt to murmur at paying their physicing bills, or those who either will not, or can not, find the means of paying them at all, are usually among the first to employ a vaulting, and puffing, empiric with money in hand. And justly, If he ever cures his patients say they, Ah! what ~~is~~ is meant by this form of expression; Is the physician to have pay for his services only when he is so fortunate, as to meet with a disease, which may readily yield to the proper exhibition of his remedies. And is he to receive nothing but reproaches and insults ^{in repay} for the many sleepless nights, and tedious days, spent in investigating and studying out the nature of the most complicated cases; those cases, which call forth the strongest energies of the mind, to devise a safe method for carrying the patient through his tedious struggle with so powerful and intricate a disease,

because after all his toil and labour and wear & tear of of mind, he may not be so fortunate, as to succeed in baffling this most formidable disease? No medical skill can deprive death of all his victims. Or is he to receive nothing in repay for the ease and comfort and short prolongation of the hours of life. (which in some cases certainly is not a small consideration) that he by his medical skill is enabled to secure, in a considerable number of cases, even where there is no rational expectation of an ultimate recovery? No, surely such sentiments as these can not be the dictates of sound reason, or common sense. They are rather the products of blind infatuation, or, more probably, the mere expressions of a moment, and not duly considered before promulgated; and need not therefore have been noticed here, but for the fact, that they are practically and extensively acted upon by far too large a portion of the community. †

† One very common fallacy and perhaps one of the most plausible, that is urged by empirics, in favour of themselves, and in disparagement of regular practitioners, is this; "That there are no certain truths in medicine; and consequently no sure tests of what is right or wrong" that Drs. are constantly differing among themselves, and that there are no fixed, and invariable, rules of practice, decided upon. That Medical men are often incompetent to the task assigned them, &c. Well now, allowing these pleas of the unqualified to have all the weight they possibly can, they prove nothing more than the great difficulty, of rightly applying the science of medicine. And show the need of a still greater amount of learning, in those who have so ^{difficult} ~~great~~ a task to perform. If the most skilful and experienced,

have so great difficulties and uncertainties to encounter; what must be the thick darkness, in which those are left to grope, who are entirely ignorant of the properties of the drugs which they administer, and the different effects which the same remedy may produce in different constitutions, or in the same constitution, at different periods, and stages, of the disease, &c.

The difference which the same disease may assume in different individuals, and the changes which it may undergo in consequence of stage, type, &c. may render the same remedy, either good, inefficient, or injurious, according to these varying circumstances. But surely, in a subject where so great difficulties and uncertainties are to be encountered by the most skilful, the idea of its being on this very account, equally committed to the ignorant as of the well informed, is too absurd to be openly propounded and espoused in the nineteenth century; though it is practically, and extensively, acted upon, among a too easily deluded public.

An other argument which some of the advocates of quackery hold up in favour of this system, is — that she is the mother of invention; and consequently, that to put down empiricism would be to check discovery. Now that she is a mother of invention, I do not in the least doubt; but her inventions consist wholly, in devising means for carrying on this system of humbug and deceit, without exposing its unjust claims to the patronage of the public. But to say, that to put down empiricism would be to check discovery, is certainly saying what is very far from the fact. Empiricism at least in the present day, furnishes no discoveries. I am not aware, nor indeed do I believe, that a quack ever stumbled upon, a valuable remedy in medicine. Or ever was the means of introducing an important article

into practice. I mean any other than a physician. Secrecy is not at all necessary to the discovery of new remedies, nor to the right application of them. It is merely an engine of delusion, fraud, and ~~deceit~~, mischief; and as such, it is resorted to on a frightful scale. But even allowing that the quack may discover a valuable remedy, he can never rightly apply it. As before said mens constitutions differ, the same disease differs in different individuals, and in the same individual at different times, thus rendering the same remedy either good, inefficient, or injurious, according to these varying circumstances. And how can the quack, who knows not how to appreciate these circumstances, though he may have ~~rightly~~ discovered a valuable remedy ever rightly apply. If any one out of the profession has really discovered a valuable remedy, its nature should be made public. Nor should he by attempting to pass it off on the public as a panacea, more than counter-balance the benefit of so important a discovery. Oh! but, say some, that would prevent the discoverer from reaping his legitimate reward. Were most or indeed were scarcely any, of the secret remedies really important, this ^{argument} might carry some weight with it. But the truth is as I have said before; that the secrecy of the composition is employed only to conceal the inert or dangerous nature of the drug. We seldom, at least in this country, see evident good entirely unrequited. I repeat, it is not from empiricism, that we obtain our new and valuable remedies, but it is from the sister science of chemistry, that we obtain such remedies as Iodine, Quinia, and Morphia. That this is the fact a glance at the patent medicines, and a slight examination of the analyses of many of the secret nostrums, will clearly show and conclusively prove. Any possible good which can result to science or the public from its

continuance, is too minute for calculation, the evil, is great, prominent, and frightful

Well now the question naturally arises, what is the remedy for this state of things, or by what means can quackery be done away? Some writers on the subject have advised a general study of medicine by the community as the only means of accomplishing this object. The thing itself is impossible. And even if it could be carried into effect would not the mischief resulting from this course be almost incalculable?

How could one in a thousand of the community acquire any considerable knowledge of all the different branches of medical science. It unfolds a wide field, embracing, anatomy, chemistry, Botany, Zoology, mineralogy, pharmacy, practice of medicine, and various other branches of physical science, either of which alone cultivated in its fullest extent, would be sufficient to engage the incessant and laborious occupation of the mind. The smattering of medical science which they could possibly obtain, would only tend to render a large number of them hypochondriacs. Even medical men themselves are far more frightened by their own ailments than ^{we} their most ignorant patients. Now, as I can see, is it possible to devise any means by which to accomplish this object so long as the state legislatures shall continue to lend their aid in securing to the inventors of patent quack medicines the means of deceiving the public

How vast is the injury done to the public every year, by permitting secret nostrums to be advertised on so large a scale in the public news papers. These advertisements, coming as they do into the hands of persons ignorant of medical knowledge, with their many certificates and

recommendations to some of which I am sorry to say, are ^{even} attached the names of eminent medical men; those too who it would seem should have known better) are yearly, the means, either directly, or indirectly, of destroying many lives. Frequently a person labouring under some dangerous disease is influenced by the great recommendations, which some insect nostrum is receiving in the newspapers, to delay the only effectual means of curing his disease, until it is too late to succeed by any treatment whatever, under the vain hope that he may possibly be relieved of his malady in the more simple manner.

Medical men should be exceedingly careful about attaching their names to certificates of this kind. Indeed it seems to me, that it should never be done, for it will have a tendency to lead many valetudinarians astray. It seems to me, that the legislatures in every state, ought to prohibit by law the advertising of secret nostrums in the public newspapers and other public prints. And every medical man should use his influence to bring about this thing. And those whose influence is great in the profession, should use that influence in bringing the legislative bodies to effect this object. If this can be done, it seems to me that one great step would be accomplished, towards putting down, or checking at any rate, quackery, and preventing a very considerable amount of the injury which is now resulting to the public from its continuance. But it would still remain, to prevent the vending of secret nostrums, as such, by their respective agents, by the apothecaries &c in the same manner which in my opinion should be done. Because; for the reasons above stated, secrecy is not necessary to the proper application of any important remedy to any disease; nor is it necessary to secure to the discoverer of a valuable remedy

The "ultimate reward" no possible good of this kind can result from it. It is a mere corollary to the inert or dangerous nature of ~~the~~ the article. It seems to me that more can be done toward suppressing quackery by legislative enactments, than by all other means put together, and that it is almost, if not quite, the only way, in which any thing effectual can be done towards accomplishing this object. But after all I do not think that quackery can be entirely prevented, by any of these means. Men will find some way to evade the laws or escape punishment. We see what has been the effect of laws of this kind in England.

At first, a law was passed that Surgeons, (for they were accustomed to prescribe and attend to patients), should be men educated in the science of medicine. On the passing of the law there sprung up immediately another set of men - the apothecaries, who took upon themselves to prescribe and practice physic &c. And after a long struggle, it was decided that these apothecaries should also be men of medical science. And now a new sect still has sprung up, who style themselves the Chemists: These attend to, forming and preparing medicines, prescribing &c. And now the question is agitated, whether these Chemists (as they style themselves) should be required, also, to be educated in the science of medicine as well.

It is probable that this difficulty always will exist, to a greater or less extent, in attempting to enforce a medical education on this class of community.

To the young practitioner who is about commencing his labours, these things are frequently the cause of considerable embarrassment. And even to those more advanced in years, who have had much more experience, and who may be well established in practice, they are sometimes a source of great annoyance. But nevertheless, the young practitioner has many things to cheer him, and encourage him on in pursuit of his profession. If he is industrious and persevering in his labours, if he makes it his great object to increase in his professional knowledge; and if he subordinates every other desire and interest to the simple business of doing good to his fellow men; he will always have the consolation of a clear conscience, and those pleasurable feelings arising from the consciousness of having done right, to cheer him through all the changing scenes which he may be called to pass.



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