

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

“Mental Therapeutics”

To the Editors of THE LANCET

SIRS,—My previous remarks in THE LANCET, written with a view to call attention to the much-neglected subject of Mental Therapeutics, received great point from an annotation in the same number on the “Immunity of Quackery.” The writer, speaking of the failure of a recent prosecution, alludes to the “remarkable licence” that quacks enjoy. He points out what a ridiculous state of affairs it is that the public persistently continue to have recourse to quacks when they have the whole medical profession at their service. He goes on to say that the eulogy of grateful patients, though given in good faith, cannot be depended upon; for, he proceeds to point out, “there are no limits to the imagination of the hypochondriac and hysterical subject.” Now, in all this the writer does not say why quacks still flourish at the close of the nineteenth century, nor why, in this educated period, they are as numerous, or more so, as in the dark ages, and can still undoubtedly produce large numbers of genuine cures. If the common sense of the public has not yet enabled this enlightened body to sufficiently distinguish between the value of the regular orthodox practitioner and the opposing army of quacks, special “pathists,” and faddists of all sorts, whether counts or commoners, it is to be feared that there is rather a poor prospect of their ever doing so as long as matters are as they are. The public, curiously enough, set a far higher value on a “cure” than the trained professional man. With him, we may, I think, assert, interest centres in the diagnosis of the disease, and it is to this point that the most careful teaching and training are directed. We do not say that to most it is the “end”; but it is certainly a very prominent “means” indeed to it, and necessarily so. The public, and with them the quacks, care little about the diagnosis, for which they have neither learning nor interest; what they do look for is the cure, which, alas, is often effected without any diagnosis at all, though not without grave risk to the patient for want of it. As long, therefore, as quacks cure diseases, so long will the public employ them; and no amount of Carlylean quotations as to the number of fools in the world or contemptuous classification of the cured diseases as imaginative will alter their attitude.

What requires to be done, and what must come to pass before long, is the recognition by the medical profession that the secret of the perennial vitality of quackery is that it has used (no doubt ignorantly) what the medical profession has so systematically ignored (at any rate in its teaching): the value and the curative power of mental therapeutics. I have looked again through many leading books on medicine and therapeutics, but neither in Ziemssen nor in Hare (as representing the latest American views), nor in any other standard work, can I find this subject fairly considered and discussed. A volume called “Suggestion in Therapeutics,” from Nancy, shows the use of the mind as a curative agent when under hypnotic suggestion, but we want far more than this. The subject is of a size and growing importance to deserve far fuller and more serious consideration than it has yet received. Here and there great masters in medicine have seen the enormous value of mental therapeutics, but the subject has never been followed up, save for the sake of filthy lucre by quackery. Unzer (quoted by Tuke), in 1771, says: “Expectation of the action of a remedy often causes us to experience its operation beforehand.” I have just received a remarkable illustration of this, however, that goes far beyond this statement. A colleague of mine gave a woman the other day some opium pills to produce sleep, but forgot to tell her their object. Last week she told him the pills had opened the bowels well each morning, but had griped her a little. On inquiry he found that she had had no better sleep. Another woman thought she had taken a large dose of rhubarb as a remedy for constipation and soon had five or six movements of the bowels. She discovered afterwards that she had forgotten to take the medicine.

Hunter says: “I am confident I can fix my attention on any part till I have a sensation in that part,” while Johannes Müller affirms that “it may be stated as a general fact that any state of the body which is conceived to be approaching or expected with certain confidence will be very prone to occur, as the mere result of that idea, if it does not lie beyond the bounds of possibility.” Now this is true with regard to producing cures as well as in producing diseases, and, though I desire to write impersonally and suggestively, I may, perhaps, be allowed to adduce briefly the following remarkable instance of this. A girl aged sixteen was brought to me with

strong left convergent strabismus and diplopia and slight ptosis, with total bilateral loss of taste and smell for years, proved to be compete by careful experiment, with deafness (watch not heard at three inches from either ear) and strong spastic contraction of the left arm and hand, proceeding to rigidity and wasting of some months' standing, and some stiffening of the left hip-joint. This girl had had for months every possible ocular and general treatment, including massage, with absolutely no improvement of any symptom, the arm especially becoming more and more rigid. Confidence being gained, simple methods, inefficient in themselves, but forming vehicles through which the mind could act, proved perfectly efficacious in completely

restoring taste and smell, in entirely restoring the use of the arm and leg, in removing deafness, so that the patient's hearing became unusually acute, and in curing the strabismus and diplopia. I therefore submit that a therapeutic agent that can effect such results which have defied regular treatment directed by skilled specialists deserves a recognised place in our teaching and in all hospital clinics, for there is scarcely a single disease where it may not be advantageously used.

Reference

Lancet, 2 June 1894, 1401.

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