

Oration from 1896

Oration Title:

Look Forward and Not Back. Look Upward and Not Down. Look Outward and Not In.

Orator:

S. B. Woodward, M.D.

Abstract of Oration:

Dr. Woodward begins his talk with the quote that is his title. Yet, he says, sometimes it is worthwhile to look at the past and see who came before oneself. Woodward recounts the names of some of the physicians in attendance, then begins to describe what transpired. He includes sections of the Society's charter to remind his colleagues of the Society's purpose, and points out how advanced an organization it was for its time. He then describes medical education and practice of the day, making special note of physicians' apprentices and medical quacks. The doctor goes on to describe the disease atmosphere of the time, citing the major causes of death, their treatments at the time, and how effectual they were. Finally he comes to a topic he had mentioned initially in his speech, the first inoculations performed by Edward Jenner just after the Worcester Medical Society was founded. Woodward describes medical practices of 100 years prior, with examples of widely accepted treatments and of a specific case study, in such a way as to make fun of the primitive practices of the time and to illustrate how far medicine has advanced in a century. Immediately after doing so, however, he praises surgical practices of the day, saying, "had antiseptics but come at the end of the 18th instead of during the 19th century, these men had, even without anaesthetics, pushed surgery far out of its despised position toward the place it now undoubtedly holds." He cites many documented cases where bold surgical procedures saved the patient's life, contrary to what had been the accepted but ineffectual treatment method.

Dr. Woodward's speech demands his colleagues' respect and admiration for their forebears of 100 years. He acknowledges the Society's founders' insight into necessary improvements in the medical profession. But he also draws attention to their primitive knowledge and ideas about illness, causation, and treatment. Woodward illustrates the great medical advances of the past century when he asks his fellow physicians to forgive their predecessors' misguided practice as they did not have the vast knowledge available at present. He demonstrates his own admiration for the physicians of a century ago through his discussion of surgery in that time.