

Oration from 1899

Oration Title:

How to Prepare for Death

Orator:

E. R. Wheeler, M.D.

Abstract of Oration:

The title refers not to the substance of this oration but only to an introductory anecdote after which Dr. Wheeler continues: "I invite your attention today, not to any particular disease, nor to the latest discoveries in medical science; nor shall I tell you how you can treat your patients the most scientifically, usher them into this world the most expeditiously, or out of it the most artistically. Any one of you could elucidate those points far better than I ... let us wander for the while through the by-ways, in the forest of doubt and uncertainty wherein much of our labor as physicians must be done. And if we stumble occasionally, or meet with nothing new or interesting, it will at least serve to pass away the hour."

Thus, Dr. Wheeler touches briefly on the exciting new field of bacteriology, and immunology. He illustrates the current scientific limits of medicine, as physicians are as yet ignorant of the nature of the anti-toxin in the miraculous preventative and curative serums. There are still hundreds of conditions for which the cause and/or cure are unknown.

Wheeler then shifts to a more in-depth exploration of the influence of mind and personality on a patient's health. He says that modern doctors readily reject this concept because of its connection to quackery through practices such as hypnotism, suggestion, and phrenology. He suggests that a patient's surroundings and consequent attitude exert a large influence on his eventual recuperation or deterioration and that psychology and suggestion "deserve a more careful study than is accorded them by the profession." He believes that phrenology, though largely nonsense, offers some valuable insight into a connection between skull shape and personality and that as certain personality traits are exercised, the brain grows and these physical characteristics are passed down to the offspring. Once physicians accept and learn these principles and apply them to their practice, they will be better equipped to deal with patients on a fuller scale, encompassing mental and physical health.

Wheeler laments the widespread popular use of patent medicines. The charlatans who produce them and the newspapers that advertise them are cheating the public out of millions of dollars for little, if any, health benefit. He asserts that legislation must be passed requiring an exact list of the ingredients and their proportions in each medicine on the market. Wheeler also comes down hard on his colleagues who sometimes exaggerate patients' conditions in order to sell

them medications.

Next he denounces the Christian Science movement as harmful especially to the children who are denied medical intervention by their parents. He calls for a law to protect these innocents. Wheeler is exasperated by the stubbornness and primitive, superstitious beliefs of the followers of Christian Science. He sees it as an evil, greed-driven enterprise, and not as stemming from any spiritual origin. It is the obligation of the medical profession to combat this deleterious movement however possible.

Dr. Wheeler's speech is interesting in that it touches on varied but universally relevant topics in medicine at the turn of the century.