

Oration from 1901

Oration Title:

The Physician's Adaptation to Modern Conditions

Orator:

E. W. Norwood, M.D.

Abstract of Oration:

Dr. Norwood's talk begins with an overview of the state of medicine in the preceding 150 years and he highlights the primitiveness of medicine in past times. Examples he gives are the Massachusetts state ban on inoculation in the mid-18th century and the concept that four humours control the body and cause disease. Overall, "the medical life simply reflected the imperfect conditions of American life."

But now at the turn-of-the-century, life has changed very much due to the multiplicity of inventions and widespread and better quality education. And "into this life enters the physician, and to meet its best conditions, he should possess not only the good common sense and sound judgment, which have always been characteristic of the best physicians, but exact scientific knowledge, broad culture, quick discernment, power of adaptation, and a high sense of the dignity of medical practice." Turning to a more in-depth look at current medical education, Norwood points out that previously, American doctors had been educated in Europe which was at the forefront of Western medicine at the time. But American medical schools have sprung up and have developed so that medical education in the United States equals that in Europe. Previously most physicians learned their trade from an apprenticeship or at relatively ineffective medical schools with few courses, but now these schools have introduced three-year and then more advanced four-year curricula. A course of study like Harvard Medical School's offers "a more logical arrangement and sequence in the study of the various fundamental subjects' for the concentration of study for a given time upon special branches to the exclusion of others, for more individual instruction, for better laboratory demonstration and work, and for more elective courses."

Dr. Norwood extols the laboratory as an essential part of medical education for one cannot get so much practical knowledge nor observational skills anywhere but in a laboratory setting. Furthermore, in a hospital setting they provide a place for chemical research, pathological tests, post-mortem studies, and production of therapeutics.

Physicians have more responsibility to society than they did one hundred years ago. They must keep updated on a wider and more complex range of treatments as knowledge increases at a rapid pace. With specialization growing quickly, general practitioners must know when to refer

a patient to a specialist. The public is likewise more medically informed, and therefore physicians have a duty to keep their patients informed on their medical situation and protect them from medical quackery. Physicians must cease to consider themselves superior to the laity in intellect and education. Applying this same principle, Norwood says that Christian Science and homeopathic medicine are not a threat to traditional medicine because the people will see that they are not as effective as traditional medicine. He lauds the medical profession for supporting the innovative field of preventative medicine in spite of the fact that it "undermine[s] the very foundations upon which [the medical profession] depends."

Dr. Norwood's excitement about the future direction of medicine is readily apparent. He realizes that he and his colleagues stand on the brink of a revolutionary age in medicine and acknowledges that changes must be made to meet the demands of this new era, but he seems confident that the needs are being met.