

Oration from 1903

Oration Title:

Some of the Recent Advancements in Medical Science

Orator:

R. W. Swan, M.D.

Abstract of Oration:

Dr. Swan guides his audience through the medical advances of the past 25 years. Chief among these is Virchow's work in pathology leading to the concept of the body as a "colony" of cells and disease as an outside disruption that causes internal conflict between the different cell factions. Swan claims that the foundation this laid allowed for the further discoveries he mentions.

He touches upon issues such as the chemical production of a vast range of drugs, the development of serum therapy and especially its effectiveness against diphtheria, and the ability to protect against consumption. Pharmaceutical chemists are criticized for not concocting new medicines, only slightly reworking old medications and marketing them under new names. He admits, however, that the techniques for making drugs, their purity and resulting reliability, and dosage precision have improved enormously. For a few new therapeutics, he offers a description of the treatment and its actions. First is phototherapy where light is used to cure such ailments as cancer, small pox, and tuberculosis. He calls phototherapy "superior to any other [treatment] known to the medical science." Next is hydrotherapy which, Swan says, had been applied to every disease and condition but through scientific observation, is now more effectively employed against only a few. He fervently praises electric therapy as it allows for an anesthetic effect without drugs. Dr. Swan touches upon many varied illnesses believed to be bacterial such as smallpox, infantile summer diarrhea, epilepsy, acute rheumatism, and tetanus. The advent of a scarlet fever anti-toxin is his next topic, and he presents statistics from clinical trials as evidence of its value.

Current surgical advances are discussed. First is the introduction of a surgical procedure to alleviate and possibly even cure Bright's disease. He then describes pulmonary surgery to quite successfully treat bronchiectatic abscesses. Swan is most awed, though, by spinal column surgery in cases of vertebral fractures. Similarly, cardiac surgery has made impressive advances. The doctor emphatically supports microscopes and vivisection as crucial elements in the further advancement of medical technology.

Cancer presents a huge challenge to medical researchers. "At the present time all that has been reported, is that cancer is not contagious [sic], is not curable, can be removed if done early

enough, is relieved by X rays, and will recur again in due time." The predominant theory of the day is that cancer is caused by an infectious agent, the nature of which is disputed.

Urine and fecal analyses as diagnostic tools is his next topic. They better indicate certain intestinal and renal conditions that are otherwise difficult to diagnose. One of the challenges facing doctors, he continues, is that they do not readily draw the connection between diet and health and their patients may suffer for it. He believes that Americans tend to overeat. He disdains the practice of giving a patient more food to alleviate his symptoms as being no more logical or supported by evidence as the bloodletting and sweating of past centuries.

A lengthy discussion of gastrointestinal maladies and successful treatments follows. He especially notes the observed effects of food on such conditions. On the whole, Dr. Swan is against giving too much food nor any alcohol to invalids.

Dr. Swan's speech is partly a praiseful recounting of medical advances of the past 25 years and partly a lecture on his scientifically based opinions of gastrointestinal diseases and treatments.