

MEDICAL WRITERS THE BEST PRACTITIONERS.

[Communicated for the Boston Medical and Surgical Journal.]

THIS proposition must be received with some grains of allowance. To say that the probable motive of a large proportion of "medical writers," in this book-making age, is an ambition *to be thought* "the best practitioners," would perhaps come nearer the truth.

This reflection was suggested by an article which appeared in a late No. of the Journal, headed in round terms by the proposition above quoted; which I thought, at the time, deserved some comment, as being *rather inconclusive*.

To the purpose, then—it may be observed that a large portion of our medical literature is made up of the crude effusions of the young and inexperienced, which however laudable as evincing application and enterprise, are faulty as liable to mislead the unwary, and are certainly not to be received as proofs of "practical" ability, which the writers could not have had either time or opportunity to cultivate. A second and more voluminous class are those systematic writers, whose principles and plans of cure are confessedly erroneous, and who, of course, are not to be considered "the best practitioners." A third and still more numerous class, is the motley band of the reporters of cases which have neither newness of character nor ingenuity of treatment to recommend them to attention—promulgators of new and extraordinary remedies which do not bear the test of experiment—fanciful theorists—Mesmerists, homeopathists, hydropathists, *et hoc genus omne*, who are all "medical writers," and come within this sweeping text. The press is teeming daily with grave discourses—monographs—on some particular disease, well known by name, but hard to cure; in which the disappointed reader finds nothing but the gleanings of a medical library in a new binding, without a single new idea of any importance. What an insult to one who hungers and thirsts for something fresh and substantial, to be thus fed as they feed pigs in Westphalia, with GRAINS already digested, over and over again. How provoking, to find oneself thus beguiled of his time and money by a mere compiler, who has done little more than lend his name to an illegitimate bantling, which he has had the practical skill to lick into shape.

If a man has anything new, and worth hearing, to say, as sometimes happens, in the name of goodness let him publish it to the world; it will be attended to; but in default thereof, let him bide his time, and not suf-

fer his *cacoethes scribendi* to overwhelm us with books, which multiply words without knowledge, to make confusion worse confounded.

Mark one of these professed "writers" at the bed-side of the sick, and you shall find him, more often than otherwise, at fault in his diagnostics and prognostics, and prescribing a treatment which would shame an experienced nurse; the fact is, he has seen diseases with other men's eyes, or through the medium of books. If genius (or that indispensable we call tact) be the reward of patient observation merely, such a man seems not to have had enough of this virtue to win the prize; or if it be a natural gift, the gods have denied it to him, and books can illy supply its place.

It is a mistaken notion that all knowledge is shut up in books; the preliminary sciences which go to form the medical character—*anatomy, botany, chemistry*—are not to be acquired from books. They may, if well chosen, serve the student in his progress, as useful auxiliaries—nothing more. Books never made a physician of the reader or writer of them. They may, indeed, answer the interested views of the latter, and procure for him a factitious credit for a practical skill which he has not.

It is not true, then, that "medical writers," as such merely, are "the best practitioners"—it is not true, even, that very ingenious medical writers are of course the best practitioners. What the Ethic Bard says of the moral, is equally true of the medical, writer:—

"Who reasons wisely, is not therefore wise;
His pride in reasoning, not in acting, lies."

Physic, as well as surgery, is a practical business, and to be useful to mankind needs the guidance of a sound discretion—judgment—wisdom—but, as Armstrong has well observed—"There is a mighty difference between learning and wisdom: the physicians of Sydenham's day were learned men; they could speak and write Latin fluently; but Sydenham could do neither—he attended not to words, but to things—to the phenomena of nature—and despised the learning which was so much the pride of his cotemporaries. I have never met with a physician, either in public or private, who was a thorough-paced book-worm, who *did* study the phenomena of nature."

Physicians are very often what Milton calls, "deep versed in books, but shallow in themselves"—and if this be true of the green tree, what shall we say of the dry? since it is to be feared that many of our medical writers are as deficient in book learning as in clinical observation.

This writer has done little to establish his theory by calling up the spirits of the departed; on the other hand, he has rather reminded us that those who have written the most, have done the least to advance the knowledge, or to improve the practice, of either *physic* or *surgery*. If the merits of physicians, or their comparative skill in the healing art, was to be measured by the *page written*, their rank could soon be adjusted.

The writings of Hippocrates, including all which have been ascribed to him, are contained in a single volume of moderate size—and yet we

have the internal evidence, and the testimony of all antiquity, that he was a good practitioner.

Celsus, within a smaller compass, has left us an elegant summary of the state of physic and surgery with the Romans, at about the Augustan age, but as he is supposed not to have *practised* either, we can make little account of him in the present concern.

After a dark night and cloudy morning of more than fifteen hundred years, Sydenham appeared, and by a single volume—the *Novum Organon* of Medicine—threw more light on the treatment of the most prevalent and wide-wasting diseases which afflict humanity, than all the ponderous tomes of Boerhaave, Van Swieten or Hoffman, good and great men as they were. With all our boasted improvements and discoveries, how many diseases can we *cure*, that Sydenham could not cure?

John Hunter, 'tis true, was somewhat a voluminous writer; but he was the *author* of what he wrote—an original genius—consulted no book but the book of nature—and would have been the last man in the world to subscribe to the dogmas of this writer.

Astley Cooper never wrote for publication, I believe, until he had something to *say* of his own discoveries and improvements, and much of this he left to others to say for him—so that the extent of his practice was in an inverse ratio to the number and size of his books. Of his skill, and success we have many living witnesses, without appealing to this writer's standard of dollars and cents.

It would be a tiresome and perhaps invidious task, to pass in review the muster roll of names he has called over; but, if it were done, I doubt whether it would help his cause very materially.

Dr. Rush was one of our earliest and most copious medical writers, and, by precept and example, influenced the practice of physic in this country, for a series of years, beyond any other man. How justly his bold and unprecedented use of bloodletting and of calomel in the treatment of fever, entitle him to rank as one of the "best practitioners," is a question, I take it, long ago settled by tacit agreement. Dr. Rush, no doubt, possessed many great and good qualities—a ready writer—

"Eloquent with ease,
Intent to reason, and polite to please."

But the cast of his mind was not that which goes to form the great physician. With the enthusiasm of a reformer, his imagination was too sublimated and eccentric to be propitious to a sound judgment—he was not a Sydenham.

The writer deprecates any imputation of partiality, in his enumeration of examples to confirm his position—quite unnecessary—as it is not pretended to be as full as it might be. Some, indeed, may think his allotment to the little State of Rhode Island rather liberal; by the same rule, I suppose, that they find fault with the Constitution for allowing her as many Senators as the largest State in the Union: besides, it must be admitted in his defence, that of the two *living* medical men ascribed to her, one unfortunately died some forty years ago. Dr. Senter was indeed a distinguished practitioner both in physic and surgery, but not much of a writer

—no stranger to books, if he never wrote one. He was, however, mainly a self-educated man, and owed the extensive reputation he enjoyed to superior native sagacity, his talent for observation, and great experience. His survivor, I believe, is a considerable writer.

There may be many reasons why the best practitioner is not often a voluminous writer. He may, perhaps, be disgusted by the abortions he sees daily falling from the press; and perhaps he may think his few leisure hours better employed in *thinking*, rather than in reading or *writing* a book—but, above all, he feels and laments, that the faculties (whether natural or acquired) to which he owes his eminence—his better part of knowledge, the discriminating judgment—the tact—the practical skill—which enable him to disentangle the manifold complications of disease, and hit the right nail on the head—is a thing which he cannot *communicate* to others—it has grown with his growth—has lived, and must die with him.

Why did not Napoleon (who was a first-rate practitioner) write a book on military tactics, which might teach every commander how to gain victories like those of Austerlitz or Jena? *Sat verbum.*

We have good reason to believe, that in our own country, there have been many skilful physicians, who after a life of activity and extensive usefulness, have died thus *intestate*. Venerated and beloved as public benefactors by one generation, faintly remembered by a second, and forgotten by a third—and the *hic jacet* in some country burial-ground is all the *literature* that remains of them. S.