

THE RELATIONS OF THE MEDICAL PROFESSION TO THE
PRACTICE OF MIDWIFERY.

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It has been my privilege very recently to be somewhat active in bringing to the notice of our community, if not to justice, one of the most unnecessary and useless fixtures of our profession, the midwife. It is one of the things which the State of New York, for some unknown reason, has looked upon as a necessity; but why, I cannot determine. It appears to me that the medical profession are a unit in thought that they are unnecessary and the community would be better off without them, and yet year after year we are unable to have a law enacted whereby they can be prohibited or even restricted in their work. The reason why, I will endeavor to give as I look at it; and if I can, by my feeble effort, awaken an interest or cause this Society to see its shortcomings, I am well repaid for my effort. At a meeting of the Montgomery County Medical Society in December last I read a paper on "The Duty of the Physician to Himself," and the Society voted unanimously that a committee be appointed to draft a bill on the practice of midwifery by others than regular physicians for our county; the same has been presented to the Legislature, and is in the hands of the committee; and also to urge on the State Medical Society to draft a bill governing the practice of midwifery for the entire State.

I will be excused, I trust, if I refer to my connection with a midwife in our city, a graduate of the O'Reilly School in New York City, which the New York members, the most of them, know so well. Medical journals lately have had so much said, and

medical societies also, concerning this subject that I think I may be pardoned if I refer to it.

On Monday, September 27th, about 5 A.M., I was called to the home of a German living in our city to attend his wife, who was, as he said, "very sick, and going to have a baby." I responded to the call, and upon my arrival found the woman had been flooding, and her appearance showed her to be in a very critical condition. I found that she had been flowing at different times from the Tuesday before, six days. They said no physician had been called. I quickly made an examination and found what I anticipated, a placenta prævia. A portion of the placenta as large as my hand was lying in the vagina, and the vagina filled with a mass of clotted blood. I gave strychnine hypodermically and stimulants by the mouth, as the bag of waters was broken, head low, and cervix fully dilated. I applied the forceps and delivered easily; no flowing followed, and in twenty minutes to half an hour from the time I entered the house she was delivered. She did not rally, but died within fifteen minutes. I gave a certificate of death. The day after her burial I learned for the first time that a midwife had been attending her since the Wednesday before, and they said she told them "she had stopped the hemorrhage on one or two occasions; and all would be right, as she had eight or twelve days to go yet." I placed the case in the hands of the coroner for an investigation, visited New York City, saw quite a number of the members of this Society to learn what could be done with this woman and to investigate the O'Reilly institution. I returned to Amsterdam with much sympathy and well wishes from all the physicians I met, but with little satisfaction. After a thorough investigation by the coroner's jury, I found that in our little city alone quite a number of deaths could be traced to her door. The following verdict was rendered: "In our opinion, from the evidence we believe that Mrs. Porath came to her death through a hemorrhage, the result of placenta prævia, and through the ignorance or neglect of the midwife who was in attendance in the case by allowing her to remain in this dangerous condition without calling to her aid a competent physician, and we recommend that the Medical Society of the County of Montgomery and the Medical Society of the State of New York petition the Legislature at its next session to pass a law which will regulate the practice of midwifery."

Now, gentlemen of the State Society, what is our duty? The Montgomery County Society has responded. What is this Society going to do? Murders are committed almost daily, yet we do not raise our voice against them. If these same women came to our homes, or to the homes of the most degraded, and shot down the wife and mother, the papers would put in their largest type that "a most foul crime had been committed." And we would raise our hands in horror. But, as physicians, we members of the State Society, because we cannot have a law suited to each indi-

vidual opinion, are indifferent, if we do not oppose it. The importance of this, it seems to me, to be of consequence to us all. We are all united as to a more thorough college course, and the State law now requires four years' study. Investigation as to the cause of disease, preventive remedies, more thorough modes of disinfection, the greatest care is required for our hands and persons at confinement and operations; and yet we allow—I say *we* allow, for it is in our power to demand, if we are a unit, the restricting and education of these women—yet we allow them to continue in their nasty habits. The members of the Legislature are ready, I know, to act, when they have explained to them the injustice and danger to themselves. If the legal profession wish a law they get and get it quickly; and if we wish one, it takes us from three to six years to get it, after continuously coaxing and petitioning; and when we get it it is probably a miscarriage. Let us unite on a bill and demand its passage; throw to the winds individual preferences; get an entering wedge, and, later, change as we can. The Society of Medical Jurisprudence, the New York County Medical Society, and other societies have appointed committees, and now it remains for us to instruct our committee and see that the bill is passed. Last year the Committee on Legislation prepared a bill which was presented to the Legislature with the indorsement of the Board of Regents, and yet it died.

I do not intend to take up the time of the Society to rehearse what each of you so well know, yet a word only on the subject. Nature is a physiological process, and a child would be born whether a physician or midwife was present, or even the woman alone, in the majority of cases, and any woman who knows enough to tie a cord and wash the baby would be very much better than these meddlesome, officious, and dirty midwives who assume to know so much, while their ignorance is so great, jeopardizing lives, and we are compelled to sign their certificate of death. It may be that in some countries and at some former time there was a reason for them. But to-day, where the city provides medical attendance free and maternity hospitals are open to all who will come, poverty need be no excuse for their employment. It is by the grace of the medical profession alone that they are allowed to continue, and until this, the representative Society of the State, and other societies stand firm in the matter, back up our Committee on Legislation, and demand recognition from our members at Albany,

so long will we be the victims of abuse and imposition. Laws are passed, fines are paid for illegal practice in other departments, yet the State takes no cognizance of midwives—only in special acts. I have recently had considerable correspondence with members of this Society in cities where these special laws are in force, and they say that it is much better than no law ; but there is still room for improvement, and each of the gentlemen expresses the opinion that a uniform State law would be much better. One physician says, “ No amount of instruction and no examination, however rigid, can educate out of a midwife habitually used to the old, dirty ways of practice, nor can it teach such women and compel them to follow the principles of cleanliness that we know to be so important in this department of medicine.” It remains for us to ask our legislators for a law compelling a certain amount of education for these women, or through our indifference continue as heretofore. And I trust I am not deceived in my good opinion of this Society, and that they will not longer remain without a law on this subject. This Society, as a body, can act unanimously in instructing the Committee on Legislation, and each member as an individual has a duty to perform to request his representative in the Legislature either in person or by letter for the enactment of such a law ; and the State will be rid of an imposition upon its citizens and a blot upon our profession.

Gentlemen, what are you willing to do ?