

## British Medical Journal.

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### STYLE IN MEDICAL WRITINGS.

THAT our noble English speech is villainously misused by medical writers is a fact that must be confessed with sorrow and shame. So few, indeed, there are who can convey the knowledge that is in them in well-chosen words arranged in properly-ordered sentences that, but for two or three examples of happy union of medical thought with literary style, one might be tempted to suppose that there is a natural incompatibility between them. It is not easy to understand why the literary interpreters of medicine should be worse than those of law and divinity. The fact that medical students as a rule have to give up the study of what used to be called "polite letters" earlier than the neophytes of the other learned professions may go some way to explain their want of skill in literary expression. But though a classical training is an excellent discipline in the appreciation of the value of words, it does not of itself confer the gift of style. Great scholars, indeed, who can detect Livy's "Patavinity" and correct the grammatical eccentricities of Thucydides are often singularly clumsy and ineffective in handling their own mother tongue.

Some allowance must, we think, be made for the refractory nature of the material on which the medical writer has to work. Graces of style would be out of place in the scientific description of morbid processes and their results. But precision of language and orderly sequence in exposition will prevent misunderstanding, and smooth the reader's path through what would otherwise be a jungle of tangled statements. The subtleties of theology and law make it needful that the writer should always speak by the card lest equivocation should undo him. In medicine the cult of what Majendie called the *fait brut* makes us scornfully impatient of such verbal hair-splitting. Yet we believe that the want of accuracy in the use of words, and carelessness in definition and exactness of expression, are largely responsible for the imperfect respect in which medicine is held by many men of highly-cultivated intelligence.

In an address delivered to the students of the Leeds Medical School last October, Mr. Edmund Owen, speaking of examination papers, said that some of the answers would, as far as literary merit is concerned, scarcely reflect credit upon a boy from a Board school; he added that similar inarticulateness was occasionally met with in candidates for the highest qualifications in English surgery, and that the current style of English medical literature in general was for the most part tedious to the last degree. Testimony to the existence of this defect—more striking from the fact that it refers to candidates supposed to have had the advantage of the best literary education—is borne by the Regius Professor of Physic in the University of Cambridge. In a little book pub-

lished some time ago,<sup>1</sup> Professor Clifford Allbutt states that in the course of the year he peruses sixty or seventy theses for the degree of M.B. and about twenty-five for the degree of M.D. "The matter of these theses," he says, "is good; it is often excellent; in composition a few are good, but the "greater number are written badly, some very ill indeed." The prevailing effect of their composition," he adds, "is not mere inelegance; were it so, it were unworthy of educated men; it is such as to obscure, perplex, and even to hide or travesty the sense itself." This is just what has been said above as to the defects of medical writing in general.

The evil being admitted, what is the remedy? Writing does not, as Dogberry thought, come by nature; nor is the art so "simple" as Mr. Owen appears to believe. The remedy which he suggests is that tutors and "coaches" should themselves learn to write decent English. This is sound doctrine. But when he goes on to say, "If they deign to inquire to what source I would refer them for style, I would say the *Gospels*, the *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the *Sentimental Journey*," the advice seems to us a little doubtful. Assuredly there is no nobler English than that of the Authorized Version of the Bible, and the inspired tinker's style has caught something of its splendour. Sterne, however, is the worst possible model of style to the writer whose Muse goes afoot, and who merely wishes to say what he has to say in the simplest and clearest way, without tricks or double meanings. Nor is the style of the *Gospels* and the *Pilgrim's Progress* made for everyday use. Mr. Owen himself, we take it, might be taken aback by a clinical report written after the following fashion:

"At this his Relatives were sore amazed; not for that they believed that what he said to them was true, but because they thought that some frenzy distemper had got into his head; therefore it drawing towards night, and they hoping that sleep might settle his brains, with all haste they gat him to bed: But the night was as troublesome to him as the day; wherefore instead of sleeping, he spent it in sighs and tears. So when the morning was come, they would know how he did; and he told them, *Worse and worse*: he also set to talking to them again, but they began to be hardened; they also thought to drive away his distemper by harsh and surly carriages to him, etc."

If any English classic is to be taken as a model in medical writing, Swift, with his simplicity and directness, his precision and lucidity, would probably be the best. But all models of style are deceptive because their vices are easier to imitate than their virtues. Every man who thinks and observes for himself—and no one who cannot do this should write on medical things—will utter what is in him in his own way. But it will be well for him and for his readers if he has learnt what may be called the anatomy and physiology, that is to say, the vital structure and movement, of written language. The want of such knowledge makes genius inarticulate: how much of what was in John Hunter's mind died unrevealed, because he could not put his thought into words?

To help the medical writer to do this is the purpose of Professor Clifford Allbutt's book. He begins with some general hints on composition. Stress is rightly laid on an effective beginning. The writer should try to touch the keynote of his subject in his opening sentences; therefore it is recommended that the beginning should not be written until the author sees clear before him the course he means

<sup>1</sup> *Notes on the Composition of Scientific Papers.* By T. Clifford Allbutt, M.A., M.D., etc. London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd. 1904. (Pp. 154.)



four other Fellows of the College have been duly sent in to the Secretary. In order of seniority they are: Mr. Andrew Clark (Fellow 1873, Member 1869); Mr. G. H. Golding-Bird (Fellow 1874, Member 1872), Mr. W. Harrison Cripps (Fellow 1875, Member 1872), and Mr. W. Bruce Clarke (Fellow 1879, Member 1877). All these candidates are attached to metropolitan schools and are well-known surgeons whose merits are duly recognized by the profession. Mr. Andrew Clark has been for the last three years Chairman of the Council of the British Medical Association; he had previously been Treasurer of the Association for the usual term, and his election to the office which he now holds is sufficient evidence of the high opinion formed of his administrative abilities by the members of the Council of the Association. The additions to the museum during the past year will be on view in the Council room on the day of the Council election, and the Fellows' subscription dinner will take place at the College in the evening.

#### EMPLOYMENT OF CHILDREN.

ON February 21st the London County Council issued by-laws made under the Employment of Children Act, 1903, to regulate (a) the employment of children generally, and (b) street trading by persons under the age of 16. Objections having been received, the Home Secretary has directed that a public inquiry shall be held by Mr. Chester Jones, opening at the County Hall, Spring Gardens, on Monday next at 11 a.m. The by-laws propose to prohibit the employment of any child under the age of 11 years absolutely, and of any child under the age of 12 years in any handicraft carried on in any house or other building otherwise than for short periods and at irregular intervals. A child liable to attend school full time is not to be employed on any day before 7 a.m., or after 7 p.m., and a child liable to attend school half time is not to be employed before or after the same hours on days when the school is open. Further, a child liable to attend school is not to be employed for more than 15 hours in any week during which the school is open, and a child exempt from school attendance must not be employed between the hours of 9 p.m. and 7 a.m., nor for more than eight hours in any one day, or forty hours in any one week. A child must not be employed on licensed premises unless liquors are exclusively sold in sealed vessels, nor in a laundry or in the business of a barber or hairdresser. With regard to street trading the by-laws would absolutely prohibit a girl under the age of 16 from being employed in street trading except when accompanied by her parent, and would provide that a child between the ages of 11 and 16 while engaged in street trading must wear a badge indicating the police division and the child's registered number. The proposed by-laws extend considerably the provisions of the Act itself, as is clearly contemplated by its first and second sections, but do not in any way violate its principle. The Act, for instance, provides that no child shall be employed between the hours of 9 p.m. and 6 a.m.—the by-laws extend this time of rest to 7 a.m., certainly a move in the right direction. The Act prohibits the employment in street trading of a child under the age of 11, but leaves it to the local authority to prohibit street trading except subject to such conditions as to age, sex or otherwise, or as to the holding of a licence, as it may determine. The London County Council, therefore, in making by-laws regulating street trading and requiring a badge to be worn, is well within the intention of the act, and the by-law which proposes to forbid any person under the age of 16 from carrying on street trading after 9 p.m. or before 6 a.m. appears to be a very reasonable provision. It will, it may be hoped, not only keep the children out of the way of temptation, but also give them a better chance of obtaining a reasonable time in bed.

#### THE PROTECTIVE ACTION OF SNAKE VENOM ON BLOOD CORPUSCLES.

It is a peculiar property of snake venom that when the optimum of its haemolytic action is exceeded the degree of haemolysis which it is capable of producing diminishes

progressively as the dosage of the venom increases. To this protective action of strong solutions of venom Dr. Hideyo Noguchi has recently been devoting special attention.<sup>1</sup> For most of his experiments he has employed horse's blood. He finds that washed blood corpuscles in a concentration of about 5 per cent. suspended in salt solution containing above 4 per cent. of cobra venom undergo changes in their resistance to certain physical and chemical agents. They become non-haemolysable by water, ether, saponin, and relatively strong solutions of lecithin, provided that the excess of venom has not been entirely removed. On the other hand, certain acids and alkalies, with the exception of ammonia, lake the venomized corpuscles more easily than normal corpuscles. Venom solutions of 2 per cent. or less exert no protective property upon blood corpuscles, but, on the contrary, render them more easily laked by the same physical and chemical agents. The changes upon which the protection depends can be removed by repeated washings of the venomized corpuscles in 0.9 per cent. salt solution, and the corpuscles are then left in a state of diminished resistance to injurious agencies. The substance in the venom upon which the protective action depends is not destroyed by a temperature of 95° C. Dr. Noguchi is of opinion that the process consists in the formation by the venom of a compound, insoluble in water, with certain of the corpuscular constituents, probably with the haemoglobin. He does not believe that the permeability of the corpuscles is greatly altered. This venom-proteid compound is soluble in acids and alkalies, and even in a large excess of salt solution; hence removal of the protective influence is easily accomplished. In addition to cobra venom, crotalus and moccasin venoms possess this protective property, but in a less degree. The protective power is not exhibited towards the blood of all species of animals. Dog corpuscles, for example, are not protected by cobra venom.

#### THE STORY OF THE RED CROSS MOVEMENT.

MR. ARNOLD DE LISLE has written a short but interesting account of the formation of the Red Cross movement since its foundation by Henri Dunant.<sup>2</sup> In these days of organized medical military departments attached to the armies of all civilized nations it is difficult to believe that it is but forty-five years since they came into existence. Before that date, in all probability ever since battles on a large scale were fought, some sort of medical assistance was attached to the forces engaged, but at the best it was inadequate and wholly wanting in system. Until recent years regimental surgeons were the only attempt at providing surgical assistance, but they were without bearers or ambulances other than those that chance or fortune threw in their way. It was at the battle of Solferino in 1859 that Dunant perceived what war meant, and it was the heart-rending scenes he saw then and his inability to cope with the sufferings of the wounded that prompted him to devote his life to alleviate the horrors of war. By indefatigable efforts, by journeys to many of the European Courts, and by earnestness of purpose, Dunant succeeded in bringing about a meeting at Geneva on February 9th, 1863. This gathering of representatives of most European Governments came to be known as the first Geneva Conference; it was followed in August, 1864, by a second meeting—the Diplomatic Convention—when twelve representatives of Sovereign States, duly authorized by their respective Governments, signed the ten articles submitted to them, and thereby laid the foundation of International Red Cross laws and observances. The rules of the Geneva Convention are simple. They consist merely of a guarantee given by the Governments which signed the Convention, that all persons and things engaged in the service of the sick and wounded should have the protection of neutrality during time of war. It is well that the work of Henri Dunant should be recorded and his memory cherished; and Mr. Arnold de Lisle has not only made an

<sup>1</sup> *Journ. of Exper. Med.*, April, 1905.

<sup>2</sup> *The Story of the Red Cross Movement*. By Arnold de Lisle. London: Office of the Banner, and Metherton, Worcs.: A. De Lisle. 1904. (Crown 8vo, pp. 73. 1s.)