

THE
CANADIAN PRACTITIONER

FORMERLY "THE CANADIAN JOURNAL OF MEDICAL SCIENCE."

EDITOR:

A. H. WRIGHT, B.A., M.D. Tor., M.R.C.S. England.

Business Management, - - - The J. E. BRYANT COMPANY (Limited), 58 Bay Street.

TORONTO, NOVEMBER 2, 1891.

Original Communications.

**THE VALUE OF THE STUDY OF
MEDICINE.***

BY R. M. BUCKE, M.D.,

Medical Superintendent of the Asylum for Insane, London, Ont.

At first sight nothing seems more obvious than the value of the study of medicine, but as a matter of fact there are few things less so; for what seems its greatest value is in reality its least, and its greatest value is either not seen at all, or when seen not recognized.

In the minds of most people the chief, if not the only, object of the study of medicine is the cure of disease, and no doubt it has some value in this direction, though wonderfully little as compared to what is generally believed. A few diseases can be cured, but by far the greater number cannot be cured by any means known to the world at present. Of those diseases which cannot be cured some lead inevitably to death; the rest, after running a longer or shorter course, spontaneously subside, and the patient regains his health. But it does not follow that in cases where the science of medicine cannot cure it is therefore valueless. In cases where the disease leads with sure steps, faster or slower, to death, there are few instances in which life cannot be prolonged and suffering lessened by a wise use of the means at the disposal of the trained physician. Neither does it follow that the science of medicine is useless in

cases where, though the disease cannot be cured, its natural tendency is towards recovery, for in such cases the comfort of the patient can often be greatly promoted by judicious management. And a knowledge of the natural history of the disease will often enable the physician to give such advice and warning as may lead to the avoidance of serious mistakes, which might, and probably otherwise would, be made by those in charge of the sick person, or by the sick person himself. The study of medicine, therefore, is valuable, first, for the cure of disease; second, for the relief of suffering; third, for the prolongation of life; and fourth, for the management of such diseases as tend to get well of themselves.

All these are very well, and when any of us are sick we are glad to get an educated physician to tell us what to do and to help us get better; but they are, all put together, a small matter compared with the next factor in the value of the study of medicine which is to be mentioned, namely, the prevention of disease.

This is the field in which medicine has made its great practical conquests, and those that it has made in this field I firmly believe are trifling compared to those that await it in the near future. But consider for a moment what has been done already in this direction. Many of the most deadly diseases, such as the plague, cholera, and small-pox, have been either entirely or almost entirely stamped out in civilized countries, and the avoidance of other diseases, such as typhoid fever, is surely, if somewhat

*Abstract of introductory lecture delivered at the opening exercises of the Medical Faculty of McGill University, October 1st, 1891.