

used. Thus for nearly four centuries mercury has been used for syphilis, and I doubt if anyone could even now tell the precise method of its action. Dr. Withering 115 years ago was shown a family receipt for dropsy concocted by an old woman in Shropshire, in which he recognised foxglove as the essential ingredient. Yet, familiar as we have so long been with digitalis, it is only within very recent years that we have had, piece by piece, explained to us, by physiological experiment, the phenomena of slowing and increased regularity of pulse with concentration of force and an increased flow of urine, which bedside observation had taught us to be the beneficent effects of the drug. Cinchona bark has for three and a-half centuries been used for intermittent fever, and Fowler's ague drops were employed in the same disease more than a hundred years ago, yet it is only with the discovery of the ague plasmodium by Laveran (1880), twenty years ago, that the use of quinine and arsenic could be regarded as rationally justified. Again, no one who has any recollection of rheumatic fever in the days preceding the introduction of the salicin treatment by Dr. Maclagan in 1874 can fail to appreciate the great value of that therapeutical discovery, yet our knowledge of the exact method of its action is at present but inferential.

We may then be thankful for much in empiricism which is but unexplained observation, the well-attested results of which we should be as foolish to reject because unexplained as to refuse to profit by the sunshine until we knew the composition of its rays. The great object of this Society is to gain increased knowledge of practical medicine by "the collection of cases, especially such as bear upon undetermined questions in pathology and therapeutics," and by pursuing it concurrently with the advance of contributory scientific research and discovery we have vastly improved our handling of drugs often empirically found, in decision and definiteness, when to employ, how far to push, and when to withhold.

THE ETIOLOGY OF ACUTE SPECIFIC DISEASES.

Great strides forward have been made since twenty five years ago; Sir W. Jenner spoke here of "the contagious quality of acute specific diseases" as "a something given off from some part of the sick which can, when properly applied, excite the same disease in another person, and which can excite no other disease." What that something is has been rendered plain to us mostly within the last fifteen years in nearly every one of the acute specific diseases, and in some others which, although specific, are not acute. Leprosy,