

AMERICAN MEDICAL LITERATURE.

The following report on the Medical Literature of the United States was made to the American Medical Association, at its last meeting, by Dr. L. P. Yandell, chairman of the committee:

"The growth of the medical literature of the United States in the twenty-five years since this Association was organized must be gratifying to the pride of every American physician. Going back only a quarter of a century beyond the date referred to, we reach a period in the history of our country when it was nearly destitute of original works on medicine, and we were almost entirely dependent as a profession upon European surgeons and physicians for instruction. At the present time it is not arrogant to say that in this respect we are independent of the world. If an embargo were laid to-day upon all foreign medical works, our own authors would supply all the text-books required by our students, and furnish guides to the practitioner in all the departments of medicine. Nor should we be charged with vain-gloriousness, we believe, if we went further and affirmed that for clearness and fullness of information on all practical points—as exponents of the existing art and science of medicine—they would compare favourably with the best writings of our brethren abroad on the same subjects.

"If then it was practicable when the Association was instituted to report, as the Committee on Medical Literature was required to do, 'on all the periodical medical publications of the country, and the more important articles therein presented to the profession, and on all the original medical publications and medical compilations and compends by American writers;' and, in addition to this, to notice 'all the reprints of foreign medical works,' assuredly it is practicable no longer. The rivulet which constituted our literature at the beginning of the century 'has swollen into a torrent—augmented into a river—expanded into a sea.' A committee might indeed compress it in a report if adequate leisure could be commanded for its preparation; but then the Association would have neither the time nor the patience to listen to such a paper, nor room for it in a single volume of its Transactions.

"Nevertheless, while shrinking from the task originally imposed upon the Committee on Medical Literature, there are functions which it may still perform, we think, with advantage to the profession. It can not be otherwise than profitable to take a survey now and then of the medical productions in which we so abound; to inquire, in an impartial spirit, into their character, their merits, and their deficiencies, their shortcomings and their claims to ambition; and especially how our growing literature may be still further elevated and enriched. For, pleasant as it is to dwell upon the progress which it has made in our day, no one will deny that there are faults about it which call loudly for correction.

"During many years past journalism has formed the most striking feature in the medical literature of America. The number of medical journals issued in the United States at this time exceeds forty. It has hardly varied at all in the

last twelve months, a few having been discontinued, and a somewhat greater number having come out in their room. Those which have ceased to appear are the journals of the Gynecological Society of Boston and the Psychological Journal of Medicine—two of the ablest on the list. We are glad to announce the revival of the Charleston Journal of Medicine after a suspension of many years. The two new candidates for professional favour are the Sanitarian and the Archives of Scientific and Practical Medicine. The failure of publications possessing the high literary and professional merits of the two journals just mentioned indicates, it would seem, that the profession, much as it is disposed to favour a subdivision of labour in it, is not yet quite ready to sustain works devoted to specialities.

"The fact that we support so large a number of journals devoted to medicine—a number exceeding that of any other country, and equal perhaps to that of France and Great Britain, if not of all Europe united—is certainly significant. These periodicals have subscribers enough to justify their publication and to sustain them all in a state of comparative vigour. This fact implies an equal, nay, a much larger number of readers, and consequently a very wide diffusion of medical facts and news. How widely medical knowledge is in this way diffused it would indeed be impossible to estimate. The discoveries, the new thoughts, the changes in medical doctrine and practice, wherever occurring, are announced in a little while at the door of every physician in our country. And not only so, but many become subscribers and readers of journals, and many are induced to write for them when issued in their neighbourhood and conducted by editors known to them, who would never seek these publications if issued at a distance. There can not be a doubt in any mind that the redundancy of this literature acts thus beneficially upon our profession. It is impossible to doubt that as a result of this excess the body of the profession is far better informed and the number of medical writers very much increased.

"But these advantages, it can not be denied, are enjoyed at the expense of some countervailing evils. In truth it may be affirmed that the superabundance of our journals is the chief cause of the defects of which all complain. The ailment that would render a dozen vigorous divided among four times that number is barely sufficient to keep a majority of them alive. The support every way is manifestly, as to most of them, although inadequate. Not only is the subscription insufficient for any thing beyond a feeble maintenance, but the corps of contributors is too small to give the proper variety and interest to their pages. For writers on medicine at this time, however it may have been in a former age, are not able to spin out of their brains matter acceptable to their readers as spiders spin their webs out of their bowels; but they must have experience, observation, ascertained facts, as a basis of their essays if they would make them readable. But in the pressing necessity of his case the medical editor is often compelled to admit crude, vague, rambling articles, which, if

his supply of matter were abundant, he would not hesitate a moment about rejecting. No choice is left him. The inevitable day is coming round when its number must appear; the printer is waiting, and copy must be forthcoming. Such as the editor's drawer affords he is obliged to give out; and like the actor, whose part in the play was to conduct a snow-storm, if his stock of white paper is exhausted in the midst of it, he has nothing left him but to snow such brown paper as may be at hand.

"Nor is this the whole extent of the trouble with our journalism. The editors in too many instances devote only such odds and ends of time to their publications as they can spare from more profitable engagements. Deriving very little pecuniary emolument from their journals, they are in fact compelled to look to other employment for subsistence. Nearly all their time and thoughts are engrossed by what they regard as higher duties. The consequence is plain: their editorial functions are performed in a hurried, slovenly manner. They have not the leisure to 'edit' their works in any true sense of that term. They can not afford time to correct the papers sent them, and prepare them for the public eye. These, it is safe to say, are for the most part hastily written, very often by young, unpractised writers; and while containing many grains of valuable truth are charged with no small amount of chaff, which demands the winnowing care of the editor; and failing in this they are sent to their account before a critical public 'with all their imperfections on their heads.'

"But there is also much for contributors to do. 'Easy writing,' it has been said, 'makes very hard reading;' no class of readers has ever felt the truth of the remarks more keenly than editors. The weariness of mind, the vexation of spirit with which they have had to address themselves to the irksome toil of getting into shape papers dashed off by their inexperienced authors at a single sitting, is hardly exceeded in all the callings to which men devote themselves. The writers of our journals of medicine should reform this altogether. They should compose their articles with extreme diligence, and resolve never to send one away until they have made it as perfect as they can. 'True ease in writing comes from art, not chance.' Every student of medicine should look forward to becoming a writer, and begin early to cultivate his powers in that way. It will sharpen his observation and give accuracy to his knowledge to write histories of the cases of disease that may be presented to his notice, and to make notes as full as he can of every thing of interest passing before him in his profession. *Nulla dies sine linea* should be his motto. No day should be permitted to elapse without some addition to his note-book. Taking the reports of cases by some good author as his model, and assiduously cultivating the habit of writing out in clear, concise, appropriate language his own daily observations, he will have become a practised writer by the time he is ready to take his degree. He may be a classical scholar or he may not; his acquaintance with other languages will not make him a writer of his own without practice.