

## The Northern Lancet.

*Gleanings from the journals of the World all that is new in Medicine, Surgery and Pharmacy, placing monthly before its readers in a condensed form Medical, Surgical, Obstetrical and Pharmaceutical advances in both hemispheres.*

WINNIPEG, OCTOBER, 1889.

### THE DISPOSAL OF THE DEAD.

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Read before the Medical Society of the County of Kings,  
From the Brooklyn Medical Journal.

The recent researches of Pasteur into the cause of an outbreak of charbon have thrown much light on the etiology of that disease. "A sheep which had died of charbon (or anthrax) was buried at the depth of twenty feet in the ground, in a field which, for ten or twelve years after, ceased to be used as a pasture-ground. After that length of time some healthy sheep were pastured in that field; soon after, three sheep were taken ill and died of charbon, at a time when the disease did not exist in that locality or environs. Upon diligent investigation it was found that the animal affected with charbon, and which had been buried twenty feet deep ten years before, was the cause of this new breaking out of the disease. Pasteur demonstrated that the germs of the disease were brought to the surface by earth-worms."

These specific germs lying latent for ten years were not destroyed by that length of time, but still retained all their vitality and were ready to germinate and propagate disease on the first favorable opportunity.

In the *Chicago Medical Examiner* of August, 1874, appeared the following extract from the *Medical Gazette* of Paris: "In the last remarkable report of the Faculty of Medicine of Saxe, Reinhard relates that nine large and several smaller victims of the cattle plague were interred at Dresden at a depth of ten or twelve feet. It was found the next year that the water from a well situated one hundred feet from the pit in which the cattle were buried had a fetid odor and contained

butyrate of lime. At a distance of twenty feet it had the disgusting taste of butyric acid, and each quart contained about thirty grains of this substance. The bodies were subsequently disinterred and burned."

If earth burial be so innocuous and the products of the grave so harmless as many assert, it is strange that in all well-organized communities strict sanitary ordinances are found essential for the management of cemeteries.

The possibility of the pollution of potable water is shown by the enactment of stringent laws regulating the opening of wells in the vicinity of burial places. The planting of trees in cemeteries to absorb the gasses evolved, and the construction of belts of woodland to act as barriers to the escape of noxious vapors, are strongly advocated by many sanitarians. These and other hygienic requirements would hardly be rendered necessary if cemeteries were not considered to be centres of contamination and foci of infection.

Time will not permit extended reference to entombment. The monument erected by Artemisia to the memory of Mausolus, the mausoleum of Hadrian, now the castle of St. Angelo, and the pyramids, have been tombs and the wonder of ages.

Viewing the practice of tomb burial in a sanitary light, an authority says the danger of "the placing of dead bodies in tombs and vaults is far greater than burial in the ground. The earth, doubtless, does absorb and decompose into harmless products a portion of the deleterious products of decomposition; in tomb and vault burial these products are confined and allowed to escape *en masse* on every opening of the vault, or, in the more improved (?) vaults, are allowed constant egress through so-called ventilators." This statement, though plausible, is not entirely correct, as Dr. A. N. Bell clearly shows in an editorial in the *Sanitarian* for January, 1889, with special reference to the Brooklyn water supply, that the dead bodies are *not* exposed to the action of the earth until long subsequent to the access of the subsoil water, the practice of interment everywhere being to so encase the bodies as to protect them from contact with the earth. The coffins and caskets in general use retard instead of hastening