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NATURAL COURSE OF DISEASE.*

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Until a recent period, our knowledge of therapeutic processes, whether due to drugs or other agencies, was almost wholly empirical. Even yet it is only of a few agencies, of drugs especially, that we possess anything approaching accurate knowledge as to their mode of action, while of the vast majority our knowledge is quite as empirical as that of our forefathers, and in some cases perhaps much less accurate. This empirical knowledge is based on the observations of a great number of observers. It follows as an inevitable result that the great majority of the observations must be inaccurate. There are many reasons for these inaccuracies. For example, the patients on whom the observations are made, both for physical and psychical reasons, differ widely in their response to similar influences. In the next place, the judgment of the observers differs probably more widely than the susceptibilities of patients. Furthermore, the drugs and agents used often vary much in their potency. To form a just appreciation of the general value of any means we may adopt in the treatment of disease requires a very critical insight, on account, not only of the innate difficulties to be overcome, but also of the strong tendency in us to credit to the treatment whatever is favourable in the patient's progress.

The tendency is universal to regard the phenomena following

* Read at the meeting of the Medical Association of Oxford at Woodstock, May, 1907.