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THE PRESENT POSITION OF ANTISEPTIC SURGERY.*

BY J. WILLIAM WHITE, M.D.,

Professor of Clinical Surgery in the University of Pennsylvania;
Surgeon to the University and German Hospitals.

Read in the post-graduate course of the University of Toronto.
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For several years it has been my custom in my lectures at the University of Pennsylvania to pass rapidly over the evidence in support of the antiseptic theory of wound treatment with the remark that the time for argument had passed, and it was merely necessary now to present such facts as might serve to make clear such principles involved and to emphasize the enormous benefit that has resulted from the application of those principles to practical surgery. It seemed to me that the theory of antiseptics rested upon a mass of correlated facts, experimental, clinical, and bacteriological, sufficient to establish it on a firm foundation, and that the only debatable ground remaining was that relating to the selection of methods and the improvement of details. I considered that the problem had been so scientifically stated, and its solution had been so thoroughly accomplished that, as regarded the general principles, no opposing views worthy of mention remained for discussion or refutation.

*A reply to Mr. Tait's recent criticism of Sir Joseph Lister's Berlin Address.

I also thought that the whole history of the development and establishment of this great theory, while including the admirable labors of hundreds of medical men in all parts of the world, and constituting one of the brightest chapters in the record of human progress, yet centered around the figure of the English-speaking surgeon whose name was identified with it from its incipency, in whose mind the grand conception first took practical and definite shape, and whose patient, unassuming, conscientious work in elevating his original thought into a working hypothesis and in transforming the latter into a theory of world-wide acceptance, seemed to me to present perhaps the best, and certainly the most important, example of the application of purely scientific methods to practical surgery to be found in the history of the profession.

These, I say, have been my views, stated more and more dogmatically to successive classes as time went on, and with less and less thought of possible error or of contradiction from respectable surgical authorities. Of course there are always persons in every profession and in every community whose brain-cells react to new thoughts and ideas as their grosser tissues to foreign bodies. A condition of irritation is set up, followed by the expulsion of the intruder or by its encapsulation and virtual disappearance. Vaccination for variola has to-day its dozens of bitter opponents; for other infective diseases, its hundreds of skeptics; the theory of evolution, which has revolutionized the natural science of this century, is still violently attacked;