The Lure of Medical History

The advantages of a respectable acquaintance with the history of one's profession should be obvious to all and have been recognized by many. Littre, the great lexicographer, realized that without its background a science is reduced to the category of a mere trade, and Goethe with no great poetic license maintained that the history of a science is the science itself. If "each age steps on the shoulders of the ages that have gone before" (Foster), then certainly those who hope to be in the forefront of medicine must be acquainted with the body of the preceding age on whose shoulders they are to step. As a matter of practical importance, too, knowledge of how knowledge accrues and of the mistakes of the past is of prime importance in preventing similar mistakes in our present work and no one is on more unsafe ground or slips with less regret on the part of the onlookers than the coxcomb, who, disregarding the past as a dead and buried conglomeration of futile and incorrect superstitions, stakes his all on his own limited vision. As Osler says, "By the historical method alone can many problems in medicine be approached profitably. For example the student who dates his knowledge of tuberculosis from Koch may have a very correct, but a very incomplete appreciation of the subject." As a matter of fact, how many go even as far back as Koch?

If this is so widely recognized, why is the average ignorance of the history of our art so appalling? Chiefly because of the college and state board examinations, which before all else must be passed, so that with rapid accumulation of the facts of medical science, the curriculum becomes more and more overcrowded, the "exam" correspondingly more difficult and your vicious circle is established.

Fortunately, there are signs of a rift in the clouds, permitting the undergraduate student to regain from the curriculum time for thought and the cultivation of some of what might be called the "belles lettres" of his chosen profession. Prominent among these is the history of medicine, which, if impossible for most of us to cultivate as a scientific discipline on account of more pressing work, can at least fill the position of that most useful and important activity—a hobby. Many an American physician has drawn boundless pleasure from this particular hobby and a few even

2 From the laboratories of the Philadelphia General Hospital. An address to the Piersol Anatomical Society of the University of Pennsylvania, February 18, 1927.