

Dr. Henderson Irwin reporting on the progress of medicine for the years of 1850 to 1900.

Having happened in the latter part of the 19th century and being of a family of physicians as my father and two grandfathers were general practitioners, I have heard of a great deal of the history of medicine a hundred years ago. The age of science in which we live today has changed our world radically. There have been great changes in the industrial world. There have been great changes in the agricultural program and in the breeding of cattle, but none of the changes affect us individually as much as those that are due to advances of medicine. A hundred years ago the medical world was looked on more as a trade or a job, not as a profession as most people were skeptical of the healing arts. We had so many quacks and so many superstitions to overcome, and then our knowledge of medicine and surgery were very limited for very few men were college trained in those days. And the only knowledge they had of treating and diagnosing diseases was from what they read, what they observed and what they got from contact with other people.

A hundred years ago we knew very little of the physiological action and the pathological changes in the human body. And at that time we had very limited means of examination and tests to find the action and the reaction of the various glands and the many organs of the body.

A hundred years ago great epidemics of diptheria, typhoid fever, yellow fever, cholera, dysentery and malaria were periodically sweeping over Europe and America threatening the life of all humanity.

Year by year with constant observation and investigation we learned more and more concerning medical conditions, and one by one these dreadful killers were brought under control.

A hundred years ago tuberculosis usually ended fatally. In 1860 there were 761 deaths from tuberculosis alone in our state and it was thought at that time that gait, fashion, and dissipation were the cause of tuberculosis. We now know that it was only a pre-disposition or lack of resistance. More of this type of victims were in this class than there were in the most humble walks of life. In those days diabetes and pernicious anemia were morbid diseases, but they were soon understood and treatments were instituted to correct these things. Koch discovered the tubercle bacillus. Ehrlich found a steam method and Trudeau, who was a victim of tuberculosis, by his own experience found that fresh air, diet, and rest were the proper procedures in the treatment and cure of tuberculosis.

At that time malaria was the dreadful disease of the south and it was a great killer. It was thought that it was caused by the decomposition of vegetation and from moist lowlands. Not until 1898 was the blame fastened on the lowly mosquito. Prior to this time we treated malaria with quinine. But now after trying to rid



our country of the lowly mosquito we have almost gotten rid of malaria. Flies in those former days spread disease for we had poor sanitation and sewerage. Screening of houses was not even thought of, neither was sewerage disposal. Our gain of knowledge helped to correct the deplorable situation and helped prevent many communicable and contagious diseases.

A great many diseases were spread from the use of milk, because milk was not taken care of sanitarily in those days as it is now. With the coming of vaccinations by Jenner and immunization of the different things, we have almost eradicated whooping cough, small pox, typhoid fever, diphtheria and tetanus. This was a wonderful stride in the period of 1850 to 1900.

We knew very little of venereal diseases in this time and it was not found to know exactly the cause because the spirochete had not been isolated until the latter part of the 19th century. We had previously worked with these diseases with the mercurial treatment.

A hundred years ago surgeons usually failed to cure the simplest form of cancer and they had not even dreamed of attacking appendicitis, gall bladder conditions, kidney disturbance, ulcerated stomachs and things of that kind. There had been very little work done on the functions of the kidney or the suprarenal glands, but today surgeons operate on all common afflictions and many difficult ones are taken care of. Plastic surgeons and orthopedic surgeons have corrected many horrible deformities and rendered many people who were considered hopeless and rendered them very valuable aid. We have learned to control pain, wound infection, hemorrhage, and shock and we have developed techniques that enable us to invade every part of the body. In those days things like blood chemistry and spinal fluid examinations were not even thought of. Today they are very common in our diagnosis and our treatment. The coming of the stethoscope and the blood analysis were great aids in diagnosing. The discovery of radium has proven a great wonder in the treatment and the cure of certain conditions. The finding of X-ray by Roentgen in 1895 has been a God send, not only in orthopedic work, not only in injury, but in many cases to substantiate our diagnosis in conditions otherwise not able to be seen or felt.

Our knowledge of the value of calories and the necessity of replacement of vitamins have been great adjuncts in the health of the people.

The great assistance to the physician has been the better trained assistant, the better trained nurses, and the great adjuncts of the laboratory techniques by laboratory trained men. We have played a great part in better diagnosis and better treatment by the aids of these people.

The progress in prenatal and obstetrical care technique have lowered infant and maternal mortality greatly. We know now better how to take care of the mother before, we know how to prevent many serious complications of pregnancy by the conditions of their high blood pressure and by the abnormal action of the renal function, we have found out how to prevent many fatal things in obstetrics. Our procedures in delivery have been a great thing in the care of the mother and the offspring.



As a small boy I watched one of the first administrations of antitoxin in diphtheria at the latter part of the 19th century and I also saw the X-ray used the first time in this country to locate a foreign body in the human body. That was on a patient of my father's in Charlotte. I now possess my grandfather's thesis delivered one hundred years ago this month in Charleston, South Carolina, on "Scrofula", a skin disease and though it is greatly different from the diagnosis and the description and treatment of the present day, it was a wonderful paper of its kind in that year.

In the period from 1850 to 1900 the medical world made wonderful progress and the physician came unto his own as the world found they were men of honor, interested in the welfare of the people and their community and they were given greater confidence and were then looked upon as substantial and dependable people. The practice of medicine was then looked upon as a profession and we were establishing a great future for the next generation. Leaving a wonderful heritage to the younger men by their hard working and untiring predecessors.