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FISCHERISMS

BEING A SHEAF OF SUNDARY AND DIVERS UTTERANCES CULLED FROM THE LECTURES OF MARTIN H. FISCHER, PROFESSOR OF PHYSIOLOGY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI

BY

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Acknowledgment for aid in the collection of these aphorisms is made to Albert Flagge. The frontispiece is the work of Edward F. Mottern.
TO MARTIN H. FISCHER

Sir:

Since the days of Hippocrates, our father, the aphorism has been the literary vehicle of the doctor. Great teachers of our art—Jo-annes de Meditano, Boerhaave, Osler—have expressed the medical knowledge of their day in this fashion. Laymen have stolen the trick from time to time, but the aphorism remains the undisputed contribution of the doctor to literature.

The "terse, pithy statements" collected here have been gleaned from your lectures in physiology. They were uttered as asides during your academic discussions of nerves and muscles and glands and whatnot. I have collected them from the margins of the notebooks of your students, where they were jotted down in moments of abstraction among the pen-and-ink masterpieces of women and beer seidels.
You taught us the physiologic concepts of the times and we shall try to apply them in the solution of the riddles of clinical medicine. But in the years to come, when our academic enthusiasms shall have paled into the drabness of a day’s routine, the spirit behind them will continue within us. Those phrases which laid men’s souls open for dissection, those bolts of truth which shook our foundations, the daily challenges hurled to make us thinking individuals rather than standardized hawkers of wares, the constant plea that we carry ourselves as honorable men in an honorable profession—these arrows struck deep. Occasionally they wounded us, but the bow was not strung for such purpose. Nor were the arrows sharpened with the irony of the hater, but with the good humor of a thinker impatient of the shibboleths of his day. They are iconoclastic only in so far as old idols must be smashed down before room is found for better ones.

I have gathered together these aphorisms, because they will always mean more to your pupils than the printed texts in physiology, because they will be stronger reminders of the inspiring days spent in your classroom, and because they have become a lasting spur toward higher attainment in the profession you have taught us to respect and to love.

College of Medicine
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H. F.
FISCHERISMS

‖ Observation, Reason, Human Understanding, Courage; these make the physician.

‖ Surgery is the cry of defeat in medicine.

‖ The practice of medicine is a thinker's job, the practice of surgery a plumber's.

‖ Specialists never contribute anything to their specialty; Helmholtz wasn't an eye-specialist, but a German army doctor who invented the ophthalmoscope one Saturday afternoon when there wasn't anything else to do. Incidentally, he rewrote whole chapters of physics, so that the physicists only know him as one of their own. Robert Mayer wasn't a physicist, but another country doctor; and Pasteur, who made bacteriology, was a tanner's son or a chemist, as you will.

‖ Knowledge is a process of piling up facts; wisdom lies in their simplification.

‖ Whenever people haven't ideas they invent words.
Someone has said: "A conclusion is the place where you get tired thinking."

Principles are the important things; the more you have of them, the more knowledge you can carry.

You can bet on it — if everybody says that a thing is right, it's just about sure to be wrong. I cross my fingers at all popularly accepted notions.

This is the trouble with us doctors: our talk is sloppy, like the preachers' — and the result is bad for both professions.

You can't go out and teach a community to think clearly if you can't think clearly yourself.

If you do not agree with the prevalent point of view be ready to explain why.

The doctor must set the example for the community; he must command respect and awe; he must be a god in other words.

You must be a god to the outside but not to yourself. You may wobble inside, but not outside.

It is unsafe to talk mathematics. Folks do not understand.

The great man is he who sees the mundane with uncommon eyes and imagination.

Life is full of pus-wounds, headaches, bellyaches, and the sordidness of the world. The artist sees them differently, that's all! The great men of science are supreme artists.

A flustered doctor is the most useless and despicable of men. Read Osler. His doctrine of Aequinimilas should be your first and last lesson.

Nihil humanum alienum mihi putet, which is just another way of saying that you cannot be surprised.

To be surprised as a doctor is to be ignorant, intolerant, or an ass from the cornfields.

The benefits of medicine are not to be found in standards appreciated by the masses.

The first time I see you laugh at an insane man's doings I shall mark you
down as a lesser physician, for you don’t understand the human drama.

‖ The reflex is physiology below the collar button.

‖ Psychology is physiology above the collar button.

‖ Habit is a religious term. It means different things to different people.

‖ What is the first function of the brain? To inhibit reflexes. It brings in the element of delay, and so time enters the picture. At this point memory, judgment and determined action appear.

‖ The thing to get for civilization is not less, but more restraint — more self-discipline.

‖ The only thing that characterizes the greater man from the moron is his thicker layer of inhibition.

‖ We use our brains very little, and when we do, it is only to make excuses for our reflexes and our instincts — only to make our acts appear more studied.

‖ The brain is our pacemaker.

‖ There are only three instincts: eating-drinking, sex, and work. Work is the most important so far as thinking is concerned, for that is the one in which self-discipline is made.

‖ The inheritance of acquired characteristics is such that they change the whole character of a people in a generation.

‖ Redfield says that only the children of long- and hard-worked parents become great.

‖ The medical profession takes first rank because it requires most work.

‖ Expect an early death — it will keep you busier.

‖ Modern education is a mess. We do not learn for keeps. We do not correlate nor do we pyramid our facts. We lack an intellectual atmosphere. We do not emphasize our strong points. We do not teach the how and why, but rather the what — which is always changing.

‖ Even an ass can die with a degree. All it takes is four years and four thousand dollars.
Why do we study? To reach an explanation.

In order to understand a complex subject it is necessary to study simpler ones having something in common with the complex.

Textbooks are the approved cookbooks of the day.

Keep away from textbooks. The way to learn is to study the original works by the original authors. They are the ones that count. Get all there is in them, judge them, and accept or reject them according to your own way of thinking.

When there is no explanation, they give it a name. It immediately explains everything.

Do not use terms that are not understood by the man in the street.

You must acquire the ability to describe your observations and your experiences in such language that whoever observes or experiences similarly will be forced to the same conclusions.

None of the great discoveries have been made by “researchers.”

There are no dark horses in medicine. Every great man in medicine was known as a student.

Our profession is the only one which works unceasingly to annihilate itself.

The vitamins are a measure of our ignorance. Vitamin chemistry is soup chemistry.

Vitamins are the undiscovered fractions of fats and proteins.

Medicine is the one place where all the show is stripped off the human drama. You, as doctors, will be in a position to see the human race stark naked—not only physically, but mentally and morally as well.

Organizations accomplish things only when they hide an individual.

Perfected organization only means universal application of a ball and chain.

Minorities are the stars of the firmament; majorities, the darkness in which they float.
The most self-satisfying thought left the physician is that he does not have to rush with any crowd.

Idiopathic epilepsy is idiopathic ignorance on the part of the doctor.

Hysteria is the result of a bad education.

You can't interpret psychology in the terms of psychology.

Kraepelin says that insanity is due to a bottle of beer. I say it is due to a bottle of pus.

When a man lacks mental balance during a pneumonia he is said to be delirious. When he lacks mental balance without the pneumonia, he is pronounced insane by all smart doctors.

An insane man is a sick man. Please don’t forget that, gentlemen.

There is only one reason why men become addicted to drugs; they are weak men. Only strong men are cured, and they cure themselves.

We need more courage to die alone. Everybody wants to die with the regiment.

Doesn’t the streptococcus have a soul?

Find your gods and saints in men — in men who work directly for their people and not for organizations.

The inventor of soda crackers has a place in hell.

It is a classic: “The practical man is one who practices the mistakes of his forefathers.”

Think any way you please, but know why.

The philosophy which is your own is the only true religion.

I am of the Buddhists. The great Teacher comes periodically. He is followed by pupils who corrupt the texts and then a new Buddha must be born to reëstablish the truth.

We die of the things we know nothing about.
William Strietmann says: "A moment’s thought is worth an hour’s study."

Quibbling over hair-splitting qualitative differences is always an evidence of sophistry. Big distinctions are quantitative.

I never read novels. I find more romance in the living of life without seeking the synthetic stuff.

The new is born as a minority point of view, and hence is unpopular. The function of a university is to give it sanctuary.

A laboratory is a place where one may set up and control conditions.

All the world is a laboratory to the inquiring mind.

Insulin is the most sacred of the sacred soups — the endocrine secretions.

Insulin is not a cure, but a happy crutch.

Many a diabetic has managed to stay alive by stealing the bread denied him by his doctor.

Every discovery in science is a tacit criticism of things as they are. That is why the wise man is invariably called the fool.

Follow Descartes. Do not give up the religion of your youth until you get a better one.

Your trouble is that you forget. You had better start remembering — adding today’s experiences to yesterday’s — if you want to be a doctor.

It is not hard to learn more. What is hard is to unlearn when you discover yourself wrong.

Mark these words of Nevin Fenneman: "The purpose of primary education is the development of your weak characteristics; the purpose of university education, the development of your strong."

Any man who does not make himself proficient in at least two languages other than his own is a fool. Such men have the quaint habit of discovering things fifty years after all the world knows about them — because they read only their own language.
Life preys upon life. This is the most fundamental fact of biology.

When the young doctors come to me and complain that the older men don't "throw them anything," I tell them that they don't know how to catch.

The only man we have any respect for is the man who uses all the endowment he has, and uses it until he bleeds.

There are altogether too many microscopes, electrocardiographs, colorimeters, potentiometers and spinal needles in medicine.

I am suspicious of all who agree with my religion.

A man who cannot work without his hypodermic needle is a poor doctor. The amount of narcotic you use is inversely proportional to your ability.

Intelligence is exhibited by the inhibition of reflexes.

We educators overemphasize the nonessentials.

Do not sacrifice a large good for a little evil.

When in doubt as to the applicability of a disinfectant, use soap and water.

The body works twenty-four hours a day at one job — the voiding of acids.

Education must come from within. It cannot be poured into you with a soup-spoon.

You must learn to make the whole world your school.

Learn to make glorious the ordinary of the day's work. Artists paint sunlight with emetics, the juice of fruit pests, and camels' dung.

You must learn to talk clearly. The jargon of scientific terminology which rolls off your tongues is mental garbage — just a string of five-dollar words which you use without understanding.

God speaks only in monosyllables.

Sweat silently. Let's have no squawking about a little expenditure of energy.
Quit bellyaching. Doctors die like Socrates.

The patient comes with troubles that are his—not to listen to yours. If you have personal woes, carry them as Mary did her Babe.

More imagination and quiet thinking is needed.

We humans are the greatest of the earth's parasites.

The recognition of the existence of a problem is the first step in its solution.

You can move a lot of water with a thimble.

Bacteria keep us from heaven and put us there.

The diseases of old age are the diseases of children grown old.

God made the negro black to keep out the ultra-violet rays.

A lesson in ethnology: The Norse trekked north because they had fewer sweat glands than the people in the Garden.

The trouble is that somebody is going to discover me fifteen years after I am dead, and great men are not discovered until fifty years after they are dead.

Explanation in science is the restatement of a set of phenomena in simpler terms.

Major discoveries come from eradication of pet errors.

Philosophy is a mental concept of relationship.

Philosophy is a knowledge of sequences.

Homo sapiens eats slop.

The "light diet" of the average hospital is sure starvation.

Doctors confuse color and chemistry. The white meat of chicken is therefore the essence of a light diet and dark meat is poison.

Remember: "Fame consists in dying in action and getting your name misspelled on the casualty lists."
A doctor is a man possessed of such qualities that people turn to him instinctively to help them solve their problems, both material and immaterial.

Standardization is the fertilizer of university education. A little may be useful, but flowers do not grow in pure manure.

Claude Bernard holds first rank among my first-rate gods.

Nephrosis means nephritis—and ignorance on your part of its cause.

Education does not give you a boost up the ladder of knowledge, but a cramp on one of its rungs.

$pH$ is the sacred bull of modern physiology—and as near the true religion.

Note, and it has been well said: The modern specialist is one who knows more and more about less and less.

I find four great classes of students:
- The dumb who stay dumb;
- The dumb who become wise;
- The wise who are dumb;
- The wise who remain wise.

A doctor must work eighteen hours a day and seven days a week. If you cannot console yourself to this, get out of the profession.

A specialist is too often a trifling fool.

Attainment of philosophy is the aim of science.

Before learning more about embroidery, master the didactic mood—the ability to say what you mean, no more and no less.

A vitalist is one who has quit working.

No cell of the living mass, including blood and lymph, obeys the laws of dilute-solution chemistry.

Life has been reduced to getting food out of cans.

If a patient cannot clean his teeth, no dentist can do it for him.

I find that most men would rather have their bellies opened for five hundred dollars than have a tooth pulled for five.
Beef broth is that part of the cow which she could not get rid of before she died.

I hate the word *impression* when *diagnosis* is what you mean. You cannot bring a boat into port on an impression of where the north lies — nor a patient.

Many confuse hypothesis and theory. An hypothesis is a possible explanation, a theory the correct one. The establishment of theory is the very purpose of science.

As soon as you injure an animal or remove it from the physiological conditions of its life, the experiments performed upon it are practically worthless. The great discoveries in physiology are the result of work with sound organs in sound animals.

God has chosen to manifest himself on earth in the colloid state.

The heart is the only organ which takes no rest. That is why it is so good.

Take a man out of the trenches, make him straw boss and he will develop a belly.

Education is the process of driving a set of prejudices down your throats.

The classics are the gospels of the gods.

Act when you have your name on the consulting list.

They tell you that the great painters mixed blood with their pigments. It is not true; the compound used was brains.

Education! Why say it is a stimulant when it is really an anaesthetic?

Everything is common these days. We all wear the same soft collars and the same soft heads.

The minister sees them half undressed; the doctor sees them naked. They lie to the minister; they masquerade before the lawyer; they cannot deceive the discerning physician.

Stop telling men not to worry; all thinking men do; and such only are the ones who do the world's work.

A good surgeon is a good medical man who can cut. Most of the surgeons have
forgotten their medicine but go right on cutting.

¶ What makes living matter interesting? The fact that it dies; the speed of its analysis and synthesis.

¶ Synthesis is the most remarkable attribute of living matter.

¶ An extreme rise in body temperature causes heat stroke; if the sun is shining, the result is sunstroke.

¶ Anything we know nothing about is so much better than what we've got! Heaven must be a wonderful place!

¶ The specialist in medicine is usually a man who is surest about the thing that is not so.

¶ Never read a book about a book; read the book.

¶ Nobody ever reads Lamarck. They read about him. Such is modern education. This type of imbecility is the most prolific source of error in scientific thought.

¶ The theory of osmotic pressure is inadequate and unnecessary in explaining the phenomena of absorption and secretion.

¶ Gastro-enterostomy: the favorite indoor sport of surgeons.

¶ The big problems in medicine which are awaiting solution will be solved by young men. Young men always do it. They are uneducated and therefore unprejudiced.

¶ Nephritis is not a disease; it is a sign of disease.

¶ I repeat this challenge of Frank Billings: Where are the resourceful men in medicine?

¶ Only an artist with a part of God in him can see beauty in the commonplace of life. The rest merely mark time until they die.

¶ The great man is the man who has the courage to act.

¶ Life is a ticket to the greatest show on earth. As a doctor you'll have a front seat.
Only one rule in medical ethics need concern you: that action on your part which best conserves the interest of your patient.

Wait for the public to make you a specialist — don’t anoint yourself.

The public blabbers about your preventive medicine, but will neither appreciate nor pay for it. You get paid for what you cure.

Some day our generous rich will discover the advantage of endowing individuals instead of colleges.

It is not the surgeons who have made modern surgery the spectacular thing it is — it is men like Welch and Smith and Koch and Pasteur.

Do you ever ponder the advisability of not making a diagnosis and thereby avoiding a death sentence?

Watch a Chinaman play poker — and develop his kind of face when the medical cards are dealt against you.

Diagnosis is not the end but the beginning of practice.

Some day when you have time, look into the business of prayer, amulets, baths and poultices and discover for yourself how much valuable therapy the profession has cast out of the window.

When I tell you to lead the inner life, I am trying to express these words of the poet:

“If I had but one loaf of bread
I would sell half,
To buy white hyacinths
To feed my soul.”