

## THE OPPORTUNITY OF THE SECTION ON MEDICAL SCIENCES<sup>1</sup>

ON this occasion of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of the American Association for the Advancement of Science it seems appropriate for us to put our house in order and consider what measures may be taken to promote a more effective affiliation between the medical profession and this great body of scientists. The Section on Medical Sciences is a comparatively recent creation, but its immediate predecessor, the Section on Physiology and Experimental Medicine, was formed in 1901, and enough experience has been had to enable us to determine the value of a medical section and to define some of the problems which confront it. What is the outstanding function of the section? What contribution is it making to the medical profession, and what contribution is it making to the association as a whole? Unless we are satisfied that the section can perform a distinctive service towards the advancement of science, and unless we feel clear that such service is being given, it is certainly our duty to alter the character of these meetings, or, indeed, to do away with them entirely.

Scientific societies are essentially instruments designed for the dissemination of knowledge and for the support or extension of our system of scientific research. Like books, journals and laboratories, they are tools to be preserved as long as they serve a useful purpose, but when they fail in this purpose they should be destroyed to make room for more efficient apparatus or reconstructed to meet new needs. At the present time the medical sciences are in the midst of a period of expansion, and the extensive development of medical research goes hand in hand with the founding of new societies and journals designed to fill the requirements of highly specialized interests. We have reached a stage when no one can cope with medical literature as a whole and many of us fail in the struggle to keep abreast with what is published even in limited fields. This promotion of new journals and new societies is as natural as it is necessary during the periods when rapid advance is being made at special points along the frontier of knowledge, and at such times they serve an important function, but once the line of progress becomes stabilized their character tends to deteriorate and they may cease to have an adequate reason for existence. It happens, perhaps unfortunately, that more interest is manifested in creating new societies and journals than in stopping them, and the result is that many are allowed to degenerate into a dry senility when euthanasia might have cut short an honorable career. If the body of our journals and societies is to remain manageable

and serviceable those that are outworn and serve no immediate function must be rehabilitated or else completely discarded to make room for new societies and new journals to meet new needs.

At the present time, in addition to purely local societies, the medical profession gives active support to, and, therefore, presumably derives benefit from, two types of association, the membership of which has wide geographical distribution. The first of these is the large general society represented by the American Medical Association and to a lesser degree by the state medical societies and such affiliations as the Tri-State Medical Association and the Pacific Northwest Medical Association. The meetings of these bodies are attended by great numbers of practitioners and the papers are in the nature of broad presentations of subjects of practical importance. The second type of association consists of the small societies of investigators in special fields, and in their meetings topics of distinctly limited interest are presented and discussed. These two types of society account for approximately all the time that medical men can devote to such meetings, and the needs of the profession are adequately filled by the strictly medical associations already in existence. Any other organization, therefore, which would gain the support of the medical profession must be prepared to make a wholly different and an extraordinarily forcible appeal.

Where, in such a system, does the Section on Medical Sciences of this association fit? If one is to judge from the support it has received from the medical profession in recent years, we must admit that it seems to have very little place. In spite of the exertions of our devoted secretary and in spite of excellent programs, the attendance of medical men has been discouragingly small. It is true that a large number of medical practitioners and medical scientists are enrolled in the association, but this appears to be due to a desire for affiliation with the general objects of the association, and to an appreciation of the journals published by the association. Attendance at meetings has not, as yet, been to them an important part of membership, and it is such active support that must eventually be the test of success.

If this is a just appraisal of the situation, are we to conclude that our society can serve no important purpose and that our wisest course of action is to cease striving to keep it alive? As a matter of fact, I believe that a more careful consideration indicates exactly the contrary conclusion. The reason that the section has not yet made any general appeal to the medical profession is unquestionably because it has seemed to offer little that is not covered by other more widely known societies, but the actual outstanding and undeniable fact is that by virtue of its relation to the association as a whole the Section on Medical Sciences is in a position to give medical men

<sup>1</sup> Address of the vice-president and chairman of Section N—Medical Sciences—American Association for the Advancement of Science, December 29, 1923.

something that they can not obtain anywhere else. This section has no need to enter the field as a rival of other existing societies and it should not attempt to duplicate their activities, for it is happily possessed of the possibility of making a wholly distinct and unique contribution to American medicine. This unusual opportunity depends on the fact that the American Association provides a common ground on which medical men can meet their fellow-workers in other branches of science. Now it happens that never in its history has there been such vital need for medicine to strengthen its bonds with the so-called fundamental sciences, for at no time has the trend of medical research demonstrated more clearly its final dependence on these sciences. It is only a few years, for example, since the medical investigator seemed well prepared to attack the problems of metabolism if he were fortified by a background of general biological chemistry, but his successor of to-day often finds it necessary to turn to physical chemistry, to electrochemistry, to photochemistry and to the various branches of physics. In the use of these sciences the medical investigator may be forced to go entirely outside of the ranks of his own profession and seek the cooperation of experts whose experience has never brought them into contact with the field of medicine. Many of the possible linkings between medicine and what a comparatively short time ago seemed to be wholly unrelated sciences are already becoming evident to us; and no one can foretell what other unexpected affiliations may soon become desirable. It is the opportunity to strengthen and to develop these relationships that is offered by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, for its meetings draw together the foremost representatives of the various branches of science, and there, if only for a moment, we may be sure of their assistance, suggestion and criticism. Advantage has already been taken of this relationship, but it is easy to conceive how our medical programs would be still further illuminated, and the scope of the discussion broadened by the contributions of members of the sections of physics, chemistry, engineering, zoology, botany, anthropology and psychology, social and economic sciences and agriculture. The advantages of such a relationship, moreover, would not be entirely on one side, for many of those who came to help us would return to their special work with the stimulation which necessarily comes from the realization of the community of scientific thought.

The strategic position of the Section on Medical Sciences offers such an opportunity for making a distinct contribution to medicine, by promoting a closer intercourse between medical men and their fellow-scientists, that every effort should be made to overcome the practical difficulties that now stand in the way of its further development. One explanation of

the failure of medical men to attend the meetings may be found in the fact that it has seemed advisable not to undertake more than a short meeting with a single symposium at each session, and members can hardly be expected to travel considerable distances to attend so brief a meeting. A more serious consideration, however, is the fact that many of the special societies of medical scientists, the membership of which includes exactly the type of men most likely to appreciate the opportunities offered by combined meetings under the auspices of the association, hold their own sessions at the same time but frequently at a different place. The best method, therefore, for the development of the Section on Medical Sciences would seem to be to induce these special societies to meet at the same time and place as the association, and to combine, under the association, in a single session at which the dominant feature would be the discussion of subjects of mutual interest by eminent members of the non-medical sections. An attempt has already been made to bring this about, but it has not yet met with success. Many difficulties present themselves, not the least of which is the already overloaded program of many of the special societies. The only way to overcome these difficulties is to indicate more forcibly the advantages which may be anticipated from a many-sided consideration of medical problems. If it can be demonstrated that the Section on Medical Sciences does not aim to duplicate the work of any existing society, but that it has within it that which enables it to make an entirely distinct and a much needed contribution to medicine, its ultimate success would seem to be assured. The development of a closer relationship with the other sections would not only make the Section on Medical Sciences assume an important place in the medical profession, but would fulfil its larger function towards the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

FRANCIS W. PEABODY

BOSTON CITY HOSPITAL

### DMITRI NIKOLAYEVICH ANUCHIN

RUSSIAN science has sustained a severe loss in the recent death of Professor Dmitri Nikolayevich Anuchin of the Moscow University. The family of Russian scientists becomes ever smaller. Many of them are obliged to live abroad and quite a few have perished in the last few years from privation or under even more tragic circumstances.

Professor Anuchin was born in 1843. In 1867 he was graduated from Moscow University. Originally he specialized in zoology, but he soon became interested in anthropology, prehistoric archeology and geography. After several years' study in the universities of England, France, Germany and Italy, he was appointed professor of anthropology, when for