Chapter 10
Medical Contributors to Social Progress: A Significant Aspect of Humanitarian Medicine

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Scientific discoveries in the field of medicine over the last four centuries have undoubtedly had social repercussions. Edward Jenner (1749–1823) saw cowpox protecting milkmaids from smallpox and launched an inspired generalization upon the world, bringing us vaccination (from “vacca” meaning cow). While there were, temporarily, wild political happenings following the enforcement of vaccination laws—such as the burning down of the city hall by a mob in Montreal—there were massive improvements of health in society and its instruments such as hospitals, libraries, and universities. Seven examples of social, humanitarian progress following medical contributions are described below.

One of the most interesting physicians in this remarkable field was the little general practitioner in London’s east-end dockland—Dr James Parkinson. Today his name is on the lips of laymen and physicians alike, the result of his description, in 1817, of six cases of paralysis agitans seen in his practice, or taken from the sparse literature of the time.

While Parkinson is remembered for his classic medical description, and to some extent, for his early volumes on fossils, as well as the first description in English of perforation of the appendix, his contribution to social change is considerable. He began at the age of twenty-three with an attack on quacks! Moreover he struck a blow for freedom by piloting through the press the two-volume work of Tom Paine on The Rights of Man, after Paine had had to flee to France to escape arrest in London.

It was now Parkinson’s turn to be arrested, along with all who sold Paine’s work. Some were jailed for alleged “libel,” others “transported” to Australia. But Parkinson, on being hailed before Pitt, the prime minister, and the Privy Council, stood his ground and successfully challenged their right to apprehend him. Pitt spat on democracy and what he called “that monstrous doctrine” of “the rights of man.”

James Parkinson had been a pupil of the great surgeon John Hunter, whose lectures he took down in shorthand. His colleagues in the fight for democratically elected Parliament numbered, among others, writer Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Samuel Whitbread of the brewery family. The “underground” consisted of what were called “Corresponding Societies” that met in pubs—where information was exchanged and campaigns against a most corrupt British government were hatched. The problem was that while the great cities of Liverpool, Birmingham, and Manchester were denied even a single seat in the House of Commons, the unpopulated country, Cornwall, boasted 44 seats.
Parkinson lived a busy life as a general practitioner while, at the same time, discharging broadsides against the government. His pamphlet which the government found most disturbing was entitled *Revolution Without Bloodshed; or Reformation Preferable to Revolt*, though it put forward social legislation that is today on the books of all advanced countries. His targets were well chosen, for example, he said, “The present system of Excising (taxing) almost all the necessities of life, as soup, candles, starch, beer, etc. might be abolished,” and “The unfortunate tradesmen, ruined perhaps by some swindler of rank, might not be consigned to the horrors of a dungeon, because oppressed by the heavy load of misfortune.”

His books on gout and dangerous sports must have been fitted into a demanding life, along with works on chemistry and paediatrics. He served as a church trustee and went about establishing Sunday schools. The apostate Edmund Burke, once a supporter of parliamentary reform, went over to the Tory government and became its defender of corruption. He now shouted against reform. “Learning will be cast into the mire and trodden down under the hoofs of swinish multitude.”

Parkinson, using a pen rather than a sword replied by one of his sixpenny pamphlets entitled: “An address to the Hon. Edmund Burke from the swinish multitude.” He signed it “Old Hubert.” This pseudonym he applied to other pamphlets and posters put up at great risk by “billstickers”—many of whom were thrown in prison. Nevertheless, Parkinson kept after Burke, the silver-tongued orator, in a further blast: “Pearls Cast Before Swine by Edmund Burke—Scraped Together by Old Hubert.” In this masterpiece, Parkinson said it all in one phrase: “When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in contemptible struggle.”

We leave Parkinson, the physician, as we read the final words in his epoch-making *Essay on the Shaking Palsy*:

Before concluding these pages, it may be proper to observe once more, that an important object proposed to be obtained by them is, the leading of the attention of those who humanely employ anatomical examination in detecting the causes and nature of diseases, particularly to his malady. By their benevolent labours it’s real nature may be ascertained, and appropriate modes of relief, or even cure, pointed out. To such researches the healing art is already much indebted for the enlargement of its powers of lessening the evils of suffering humanity. Little is the public aware of the obligations it owes to those who, led by professional ardour, and the dictates of duty, have devoted themselves to these pursuits.

The year of Parkinson’s death, 1824, saw a precocious and diminutive youth entering Harvard College. *Oliver Wendell Holmes* found it chilly and cheerless around the temples of the law and, fortunately for all women bearing children in bacterial polluted hospitals, he took up the study of medicine. As was the custom in Boston 150 years ago, Holmes with the sons of John Collins Warren, Nathaniel Bowditch, and James Jackson went off to Paris to walk the wards of La Pitié with the great clinician Pierre Louis (also once a law student) and the father of statistics in clinical medicine Gabriel Andral. The young Americans, upon examination, became members of the Society for Medical Observation, where no holds were barred.

Holmes prospered in this highly charged intellectual climate and developed two convictions that (a) most medicines being prescribed then were better thrown into the sea, though that would be harsh on the fishes; and (b) childbed or puerperal