

signed by Dr. Hope, Dr. Home, Dr. Cullen, and Dr. Whytt, who were all great men in their day, and no more than their successors regarded teaching as merely a step to practice.

I am, Sir, yours, &c.,

Shandwick-place, Oct. 12, 1867.

JAMES SYME.

## ON THE ANTISEPTIC PROPERTY OF ALCOHOL IN FEVER.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—The interesting article on the modes of action of alcohol in your last number impels me to point out one property of great value in practice which has not, I think, attracted the attention it deserves. Whosoever has been called upon to watch and to tend cases of fever in the capacity of a nurse, as well as in that of a physician, will be able to bear testimony to the stimulating and the *sustaining* powers of alcohol. One mode by which fever tends to destroy life is by the rapid exhaustion of the nutritive properties of the blood. A quick and constantly-recurring effect of this is nervous prostration; a tendency to sink, marked by stupor and an accelerated, feeble pulse. In this condition salvation lies in the prompt administration of alcohol. The patient, out of mere excess of debility and unconsciousness, may at first refuse to take anything. But get down a teaspoonful of generous wine or brandy: a little strength returns; the sense of the want of supply, of hunger, is felt; the patient will take more with avidity; he will be roused to the capacity of swallowing more strictly nutritious food, and will thus be enabled to carry on the conflict against the exhausting and toxical influences of the fever.

Without going into the question whether alcohol is a food or not, I am in a position to state, from close clinical observation, that it, any rate, is to a certain extent a *substitute for food*, by sustaining the powers of life under circumstances where the call for food is urgent and obvious, but cannot be supplied. One proof of this lies in the extraordinary tolerance of alcohol with which we are familiar during fever.

But amply recognising, as I do, these two qualities of alcohol—first its stimulating, secondly its sustaining virtue,—there is a third, which appears to me of scarcely inferior importance. I mean its virtue as an *antiseptic*. In zymotic diseases there is not only a rapid using-up of the vital properties of the blood, but there is also a direct poisonous influence at work, owing to two causes. First, there is the specific poison of the fever, multiplying itself; secondly, there is the empoisoning process, resulting from perverted nutrition and impeded excretion. Now alcohol, which is rapidly absorbed into the circulating fluid, mixes with it, and, for a time at least, is undecomposed, and retards the double process of empoisonment by its antiseptic property. The mineral acids, I believe, aid this action. Certainly, under alcohol, the secretions in fever improve; the diarrhoeal stools of typhoid become less offensive. In puerperal fever these beneficial effects are often very marked. During the last epidemic of cholera, I put in practice the use of carbolic acid as an internal medicine, prompted by this indication. The success attending the plan was at least encouraging; and I believe that it ought to be borne in mind as a ruling principle in the treatment of zymotic diseases.

I am, &c.,

ROBERT BARNES.

Finsbury-square, Oct. 1867.

## ON THE USE OF CARBOLIC ACID.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—Since I addressed you, a week ago, I have seen Dr. Lemaire's work on Carbolic Acid, and find that, where he speaks of surgical applications of that substance, the principles and practice which he mentions are such as sufficiently to explain the insignificance of the results.

I may repeat that I never claimed to have been the first to use carbolic acid in surgery. The success which has attended its employment here depends not so much on any specific virtue in it, as on the wonderful powers of recovery possessed by injured parts when efficiently protected against the pernicious influence of decomposition. I selected carbolic acid as the most powerful of known antiseptics; but I think it not unlikely that my object might have been gained by using, on the same principle, some familiar "disinfectant." And I may

take this opportunity of warning some of your readers that they must not expect carbolic acid to act like a charm; but that, whether they employ this agent or some other of analogous properties, it is only by the light of sound pathology, and strict attention to practical details, that they can hope to attain in their full measure the magnificent results which the antiseptic treatment is capable of affording.

I am, Sir, yours, &c.,

Woodside-place, Glasgow, Oct. 5, 1867.

JOSEPH LISTER.

P.S.—October 6th.—I have to-day received a letter, of which the following is a copy, from a gentleman personally unknown to me. He seems to have had no difficulty in distinguishing between the mere use of carbolic acid and the practice which I have recommended.

J. L.

Abbey-street, Carlisle, Oct. 5, 1867.

SIR,—I have the honour of being a graduate of Edinburgh. Having obtained my degree in 1866, I visited the Paris hospitals during the whole of last winter session, spending my time entirely in hospital practice and operative surgery.

I witnessed many of the capital operations, besides three cases of ovariectomy (which proved fatal).

I think it my duty to say that, during my stay of six months, I never saw anything approaching to your treatment of wounds, &c., with carbolic acid.

The majority of surgeons used for dressing wounds, &c., "acide phénique," "aromatic lotion," and tincture of arnica. The acide phénique was a very weak solution of carbolic acid, such as has been used in our hospitals for a long time to wash wounds, &c. The aromatic lotion resembles our "red lotion," and the tincture of arnica is like our Pharmacopœia preparation (in full strength). I never remember seeing any other lotion used, but have often seen various kinds of our common ointments applied at some of the hospitals. The dressing of wounds, &c., was very slovenly, and the indiscriminate use of the means was still worse. A handful of charpie was taken from the basket, and dipped in acide phénique one day, and applied to the wound, &c., and next morning the process was repeated with aromatic lotion, or arnica, and so on. I need not say the results appeared to me most unsatisfactory.

I have taken the liberty of communicating these facts, and trust you will excuse me doing so; because, since my return from Paris (four months) I have seen your treatment applied in the clinical wards, Edinburgh, with the best results. I shall be happy to furnish you, if necessary, with the names and addresses of eight fellow-graduates who can bear testimony to the facts I have stated.

I am, Sir, yours obediently,

Professor Lister.

PHILIP HAIR, M.B.

## WEST HAM INFIRMARY.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—In your editorial remarks in THE LANCET of the 12th inst., you ask me, in reference to the crowding of the lying-in room in the West Ham Workhouse, "Why are there ten beds if only six women are allowed to sleep there?" Now, as you have asked this question, I must request you to publish the reply, which is very simple. The fact is, this room has been but recently devoted to its present use, it having been occupied formerly by aged women (for whom the curtains were put up), and the surplus beds had not yet been removed; actually, only six women slept in the room, five patients and a nurse; the helper slept in another ward. Therefore, if, in the hurry of writing, a word was incorrectly written, it does not invalidate the reply, which was directed against the statement of overcrowding. I admit that I did not take into my account of cubic space, *infants under a month old*.

I also beg leave to state, most emphatically, that I should not have troubled your columns, or those of any other journal, if your Commissioner's remarks had not reflected upon me. When he stated the lying-in room to be overcrowded, the statement affected me, and no one else, as I alone have the responsibility of arranging and placing the sick in the West Ham Workhouse.

I must repeat, also, that the remarks on the book-keeping are injurious to me, "Not a single entry in the handwriting of the medical officer."

It is undeniable that these remarks, in a public journal, bring before the notice of the Poor-law Board the fact that a medical officer has not fulfilled the law (be it good or bad is