

medicine

at M I C H I G A N

Fall 2000



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MEDICINE

THE YOUNG PHYSICIAN

Thesis by David Ward, Class of 1851

For the first several decades of the Medical School's existence, graduating students were required to present a thesis, in their own handwriting, as part of their graduation requirements. Most of these theses were about medical subjects of special interest to the student. But David Ward (M.D. 1851) took a different approach. Frustrated by the still widespread acceptance of uneducated practitioners in his new profession and clearly overwrought by the arduousness of his studies, he railed against quackery, the incurable diseases that he would face as a doctor and even the East Coast biases of those who didn't understand what a medical degree from Michigan meant.

While today's new M.D.s face challenges far different from those faced by David Ward, his passionate desire to see the world become a better place, a place where people's lives could be made happier and healthier through the care of thoughtful, highly trained physicians, is one still shared by his fellow graduates a century and a half later. The concerns expressed by panelists in the Sesquicentennial Symposium (see pages 44-47) demonstrate that today's caring physicians still face daunting forces in carrying out their mission. If David Ward were still here, he no doubt would have been a vocal participant himself!

The young physician after years of hard study, of continual drill, his empty purse made so by his devoted enthusiasm for the acquirement of his profession, finally presents himself for public patronage. And what are the questions usually asked by the public? Did you receive your degree from a medical school in N.Y. or Philadelphia? as if learning the A.B.C. in those places gave evidence of a more thorough knowledge of the alphabet than if it had been learned in Michigan.

How long have you been in practice Sir? will be the interrogatory of the many, with a criticizing tone, as if everyone must learn all by his own experience, and not profit by the thousands that have gone before, nearly in the same path.

Is this the way that a medical gentleman is to be received, after all his efforts, after all his researches? Is his youthful dream of benefiting his fellow kind, of enjoying respectability and of acquiring a competence for himself and family, to end thus?

Then comes the list of almost incurable diseases...epidemic diseases...and the long list of quacks, of charlatans, too numerous to mention that we have to combat. And do you say that we should not contend with them — that there is no use of enlightening the public on medical science — that if we will but let them alone they will die the death of all former impostors? I have sometimes thought so, but as years roll round, as Michigan lengthens in her medical history, I am somewhat disappointed. Allow me to inquire what are the positions of quite a numerous class of the people of this state, perhaps the most illiterate? I answer if I am not very much mistaken, to support quackery in its most revolting forms. Nor is this class limited to the country entirely: search Detroit, search Ann Arbor, the very seats of learning and intelligence, and you will find plenty of quack advocates. And did I say that these quackish and knavish

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sentiments were cherished entirely by the ignorant? If so I recall that assertion, for I am credibly informed, that petitions have been in circulation in Ann Arbor, and other parts of the state, praying the legislature to establish chairs for those denominated Botanists or Botanical physicians, for Uroscopists, and even for Homoeopathsists, and that some of these petitions have received the signature and support of some of our so called honorable citizens....

Nations talk about the suffering occasioned by famines, about the calamities of war; and great evils these are too, but are not some nations nourishing a vision in their own bosoms, that stings, that destroys their millions unheeded? If we could only look upon all the ruined constitutions — the lives made more miserable than death itself — the dying agonies of men, of mothers leaving all most dear, that have been caused by unskillful medical treatment, by false pretenders and quackery of every name, what heart could not feel, what eyes would not overflow with most soul-rending tears... Who is not struck with horror at such scenes though accustomed to their frequent occurrences? What tongue can tell half the bosom feels! It is good for me to be a physician, to be a young physician, for now my time may be lengthened to combat these monsters of human misery — these triflers of human life.

Liberty! how that darling word is praised, how highly prized — this is all well, but this liberty which results in sapping the life's foundation, that racks the nation's health to a skeleton, though we may continue to bow, to applaud its name, it is worse than blind submission, thus to adore the shadow without a reality.

For such liberty I pant not, and would exchange its stars and stripes, for tyranny in name, but *far less* in reality.

It is the *duty*, the *high* privilege of the physician, of the *young* physician, to expose these rascalities, whenever and wherever they may be found — *Strip* the villainous carcasses of their benign coverings, and show them to the world in all their *disgusting* putrescence.





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