

## TEACHING OF HYGIENE IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS.<sup>1</sup>

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The subject which I am about to treat is of such importance for the cause of the propagation of hygiene among the popular classes, that I thought it my duty to lay the matter before this association by calling the attention of its members to the great necessity of teaching that science in our common schools.

Before proceeding further, however, I cannot but thank the government, the council of public instruction, and especially the members of the Council of Hygiene for their constant efforts towards diffusing the elementary laws of hygiene among the popular classes of this province.

Is it not a fact, Mr. President, that the man who causes a spire of grass to grow in a sterile soil is rightly considered a benefactor of humanity? With much more sense is a man who saves a life by the means of well-understood hygienic principles the object of our admiration and gratefulness.

To our worthy president, I have reasons to believe, is due the propagation of the science of hygiene, not only in our province, but, I dare say, in the Dominion of Canada, and we should certainly be grateful to him for his noble efforts in that direction.

That there exist in most of our rural districts a good many persons totally unacquainted with the elementary principles of hygiene, is a fact quite apparent, although it is to be seriously deplored; yet, when I see the same ignorance so conspicuously displayed by men occupying high social positions, I am not quite so surprised to find the same want of knowledge existing among the illiterate.

In the country where I live and where I have passed sixteen years of my life, practising the art of medicine, I must admit that I have encountered great difficulties in putting into execution the rules of the Board of Provincial Hygiene.

In several places, burying-grounds, immediately adjoining the church, and even with charnel-houses under the latter, are to be seen.

In my village, situated on the border of a river, the ground presents a well-marked declivity towards the shore; the bulk of the population is naturally massed around the church, which is situated on an elevation and having the river on the south-east, the cemetery at the back of it, the convent to the north, and the college to the west.

The natural drain of all these edifices winds its course towards that part of the village where the population is more dense, thus exposing it to the pestilential emanations of the surrounding establishments.

<sup>1</sup>Read at the Montreal meeting.

The infiltration of the cemetery water, which works its course through the cellars of the habitations towards the river together with the contents of the drains of the buildings mentioned above, is a real source of infection.

I myself was made the target of public vengeance when I protested against the erecting of a charnel-house in the cellar of the sacristy. I must add, gentlemen, that this plan was supported by the curé of the parish and approved by an able architect of the city of Montreal; happily, the authorities of the Council of Provincial Hygiene prevented the construction of such an abomination.

Now, our citizens are to construct an aqueduct. As regards the promoters of the project itself, they undoubtedly deserve to be congratulated; but, gentlemen, I feel confident that you will be very much surprised in learning that they omitted to utilize the same excavations for the drains.

If I mention the faults of my own locality, which is, by no means, the most unhealthy one in the province, it is to give you a fair idea of the deplorable state of things existing in many other similar places.

Of course, whilst the majority of the rural population do not understand the benefit of the hygienic laws well applied, I am bound in justice to declare that a certain number of our citizens fully comprehend its great importance.

Be it sufficient to mention all the earnestness shown during the memorable epidemic of 1885, when it was known that a case of variola had made its appearance amongst us. With the help of the municipal authorities combined with the support of a few citizens, anxious for the health of their families, I have been sufficiently enabled to isolate my patient, so that the terrible scourge could extend no further. I, nevertheless, had to fight the prejudices of our councillors, who not only pretended that all these precautions were ridiculous, but added, with all the authority of their science, that contagion did not exist and that it was nothing other than a Utopia of the medical profession.

In conclusion of all I have just stated, we must, at all cost, propagate the study of hygiene among the people. The best way to promote this project is to force its special study in the elementary schools and oblige the instructors to learn it by making it a part of the curriculum of academic studies.

The children of our present elementary schools are the future members of our society. They will occupy all the positions of our social life. They will be our successors and their memory will retain whatever they may have learned at their respective primary schools.

Their brain is easy to mould and when once cast, makes an indelible impression. That children like the study of hygiene I had ample occasion to ascertain personally.

Therefore, I hold that it is through the teaching of hygiene to our children, at the same time that we teach them religion by the aid of the Catechism (which is nothing more than the application of the moral laws

for the conservation of their tender souls), that we will eradicate the unfortunate prejudices which directly cause the loss of so many citizens, who might otherwise have been the strength, glory, and pride of our country.

Thanks be to the promoters of this idea! Glory be to them, for they have discovered the right way to diminish the alarming mortality we observe in the Province of Quebec.

I join my efforts to-day to cooperate with these benefactors of humanity by insisting further on the necessity of applying, with more rigor, the laws ruling our province.

No sooner will the people fully understand the principles of this science, than we will cease to see the unpardonable negligence of parents in not having their children vaccinated; isolation and disinfection will be a safeguard against the propagation of epidemics. The municipal authorities will not be forced to proceed against those who blindly persist in sending their children to school when there exists a virulent disease in the family. The principle of contagion, which a great number deny, or at least pretend to deny, will have to be admitted; the ecclesiastical authorities will help to diffuse the light by teaching from the pulpit the measures, which must necessarily be followed, to arrest the epidemics, and the hygienic science will be recognized as the best and surest safeguard against a premature death.

We will not, then, see riots in the cities, as we have witnessed in 1885 in Montreal and St. Hyacinthe as a result of the application of the principle of compulsory vaccination. We will not see the health officer compelled to recur to the aid of a policeman in order to force the citizens to submit themselves to the law.

It is to be hoped that a case like that of the lamented Doctor St. Germain, of St. Hyacinthe, will not be repeated.

The good doctor was threatened to be shot during the exercise of his duty as health officer, while putting into force certain by-laws against smallpox. As a result of his noble and brave conduct, the nearly total loss of his clients followed, although during the whole epidemic he most generously treated the poor without the least remuneration. To the name of Doctor St. Germain respect is due. Death has taken him from his family, from his labors, and from his country; but his undying memory will ever be dear to us for in him we see a martyr who never flinched in the execution of his duties.

During the course of my experience as medical examiner I have had ample opportunity of verifying the above fact while questioning on the practice of medicine.

This important branch is only treated as a secondary matter, while it should be considered of first importance. My advice is that it should be put on the same footing as internal and external pathology.

Let us agree with Dr. Bilodeau, when he says that if we want our hopes of renovation not to be vain, if we are strongly decided to give our

elementary schools a new impulsion, and if, instead of ignorance, which still reigns in so many villages, it is to be succeeded by an era of progress, the teaching body must be everywhere of the standard that should be required.

I have shewn the necessity of teaching hygiene amongst the popular classes. Before concluding, however, I venture to remark that we do not attach sufficient importance to the study of hygiene in the medical universities of our country.

Since some years past our Provincial Government has not only shown a noble zeal in teaching agriculture in the agricultural districts of our country, but has also spent enormous sums of money with that end in view. Men of high social standing applied their talents towards the promotion of this grand cause as lecturers. Why would they not add another laurel to their glory and receive the gratitude of the Canadian people by delivering in the meantime lectures on popular hygiene ?

To instruct is to moralize, and this is best done by teaching the hygienic laws which tend to obtain the development and preservation of the physical forces.

I think I can best conclude, Mr. President, by borrowing the words of the immortal Juvenal,—*Mens sana in corpore sano*, “A sound mind in a sound body.”