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Opera Occulta

Collected from the Society's archives by C. Vaughan Ruckley

Abstract

With a mixture of pride and humility I began to turn the pages of the great leather-backed volumes which enclose the early Dissertations of the Royal Medical Society. It was something to be done with care, for the pages are brittle and cachetic. The regular, flowing, almost copper-plate writing is only slightly faded and is eminently legible. We, who can achieve immaculate script only through the medium of machinery, might pause and consider the scholarship of our predecessors who wrote Greek, Latin or English with artists' hands.

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the amount inhaled are more likely to be the factors involved (4 and 32). Petrol lighters have been suspected but it was found that they were not used any more often by patients with bronchogenic carcinoma than by non-cancer patients (13).

The tar collected from "smoking machines" is carcinogenic and in 1954 Graham (20) found that an acetone solution of cigarette tar produced epidermoid carcinoma in mice after 71 weeks which is a little more than half their average life span of two years. This period, he pointed out, was equivalent to the 30 to 50 years required in man to produce lung cancer by smoking. Campbell (3) showed that 70% of the mice surviving after repeated exposure to dust from the sweepings of tarred roads developed cancer of the skin but the concentration of tar present was far higher than that to which human beings are ever subjected. Unfortunately similar experiments cannot be employed with cigarette smoke because mice rapidly succumb to nicotine poisoning if allowed to inhale significant quantities (20). Lung tumours, however, have been

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The fascination of these works, however, does not end in the contemplation of their beauty. Into these pages has been poured all the erudition and earnest speculation of more than two hundred years ago. Not only do they carry a mass of information of the state of medical knowledge in the eighteenth century, but they also breathe an aura of the life, manners and social conditions of the time. So much is there that is interesting, so much to amaze or amuse, that it seems scarcely possible to pick out isolated passages of adequate brevity for the confines of this production. However, with the hope that the authors would have excused the mutilation of their opera, I have selected at random a few passages. They will be found in this and subsequent issues.

Diagnosis?

From a letter to the President of the Society in 1777.

"At eleven o'clock that night a messenger came to me, saying that Watson was going mad. I found him perfectly sensible, complaining of a lightness across his stomach, with a peculiar sensation (to quote his words) 'his entrails moving up and down as if they were alive,' and he said he could not drink. I had a looking glass brought privately to me, and held it up before him: the sight of which threw him into violent agitation. I then persuaded him to try to drink; but on the fluid approaching near his lips he was in a similar agitation to that which the glass produced. It next occurred to me that the accession of cold air to the body, according to some author, had the same effect; I therefore fanned him with my hat . . ."