

Physiological Therapeutics and the Dissipation of Therapeutic Gloom

THE PROPOSITION that experimental laboratory science should inform therapeutic practice and advancement became securely established in the twentieth century. During the two decades following the Civil War its acceptance was far from certain, however, for it represented but one of a number of programs envisaged for therapeutics. Physicians' expectations about the future of medical therapeutics were as diverse as were their perspectives on its past and present so evident in their discussions about change. Most practitioners agreed that the empiricist pruning of rationalistic systems had greatly improved practice, but by the 1860s they also concurred that progress along this axis had slowed to a near standstill. Therapeutics had begun to stagnate, many physicians believed, and the profession had fallen prey to therapeutic gloom. Concern over this state of things made these decades a time of exceedingly active reflection about what was to become of therapeutics, marked also by bickering about the most promising plan for escaping pessimism.

Between the mid-1860s and the mid-1880s programs for therapeutic change abounded. Some advocated the selective revival of remedies earlier in vogue, while others urged physicians to emphasize hygienic more than drug therapy, to improve practice through intensified empirical observation of drug effects, or even to turn their attention from healing individuals to the greater promise of state-sponsored preventive medicine. Of all the designs for therapeutics put on the market, the one that was most forcefully to remold medical enterprise held that knowledge produced by laboratory experimentation should become the new foundation for medical therapeutics.

In many ways this plan was also the most radical departure from