

Alcohol Upheld as an Aid to Medical Practice

Dr. Beverley Robinson, Eminent Clinician, Takes Issue with Dr. Charles H. Mayo and Other Champions of Prohibition

ALCOHOL is a common factor in the production of criminals and insanity. Alcohol facilitates the progress of many persons with weak nerves to the asylums, to the prisons—and the dogs. Poor liquor is one of the worst things on earth, and the habit of "treating" is one of the most deleterious forms of recreation. Both should be stopped and made to stay stopped. Incidentally, not many operations for appendicitis are necessary.

These assertions were made the other day by Dr. Beverley Robinson, an eminent clinician of New York, in connection with the expression of his strong conviction that the time would never come when alcohol would no longer be used in illness. So far as Dr. Robinson can see, that time should not come, for there are conditions which absolutely demand the use of alcohol as a prominent part of medicine. His opinion is based on New York experience, in hospital and at the private bedside, of more than 40 years. He is consultant at St. Luke's Hospital and at the City Hospital, and Emeritus Clinical Professor of Medicine at the University Bellevue Hospital Medical College.

The following interview was inspired by the utterances of Dr. Charles H. Mayo, the world-famous surgeon, new President of the American Medical Association, who said a few days ago in his inaugural address that there should be war prohibition. "We know that in olden times," said Dr. Mayo, "when it was found that infection spread by water and that the fermentation of alcoholic drinks killed the harmful bacteria, there was use for alcoholic drinks. But that need has passed with the control of bacteria. National prohibition should be welcomed by the medical profession."

Dr. Robinson asserted with much warmth that in a great many cases of pneumonia, diphtheria, and typhoid fever he had seen cases which were considered hopeless take a favorable turn through the administration of good liquor.

"I am confident that many old and wise practitioners would indorse my views," he said. "If the French Government has found wine such a valuable agent to her soldiers in the field, is not the rôle of the dry-as-a-bone prohibitionist somewhat precarious? One of the most esteemed medical journals of the world is *The Lancet of London*, in which appeared only recently a statement that the French Government had requisitioned for the purposes of the army a very substantial proportion of the vintage production. The writer went on to say that in France, therefore, wine had assumed a military importance, for no less than 200,000,000 gallons of wine from the country, together with 40,000,000 gallons from her Algerian colony, have been reserved for the use of the soldier. It would appear that each officer and man receives daily half a litre of wine, and *The Lancet* authority points out: 'This allowance has been adopted since the war began, and the authorities are convinced that it has contributed to the health and efficiency of the troops through a campaign conducted under very trying circumstances. The reasonable consumption of the wine of the country (vin ordinaire) is evidently regarded as beneficial rather than demoralizing.'

"Frankly," Dr. Robinson continued, "I cannot subscribe to prohibition, and yet I know and deplore the evil effects of alcoholism as much as any one. I also deplore the bad effects of overeating, bad cooking, ignorance as regards the preparation of food; but is that a reason why every one should be debarred from eating anything but what is scientifically (so-called) correct? Much of what sci-

ence has tried to show to attending physicians in hospitals, in regard to the pernicious or useless effects of alcohol in the treatment of disease, has not convinced me.

"What I am convinced of is that the best spirits and the best wines solely should be prescribed and the amount given according to individual and disease. There is a difference, I believe, between the effects of poor spirits and poor wines, and those which are known to be the purest are the best. Upon what precisely this depends I cannot always state, but I know the fact. The elimination, I take it, of fusel oil in the case of spirits, the production of certain stimulating and essential ethers in wines, or perhaps spirits, is often the true explanation. In any event, organic disease is not caused by them when properly and moderately used.

"I regret exceedingly that so distinguished a member of my profession as the President of the American Medical Association should support a now widespread and great fallacy. Dr. Mayo is a great authority; he is a great surgeon. He has said that for certain diseases he knew of other agents better than alcohol. I don't know a single one. I've practiced medicine in New York City for more than 40 years. I would no more think of treating a case of pneumonia, especially where the patient had reached a certain age, without good old brandy—I would consider it criminal not to give brandy! For stimulants or heart tonics, there are only two worth considering—one is strophanthus, the other is old brandy. The strophanthus should be given in small doses every two or three hours, at the same time as the brandy. The brandy may be given in doses from a teaspoonful to a tablespoonful in a very little water, or vichy water, ice cold.

"One of my old 'boys' had a patient some time ago whom he asked me to see in consultation. It was an acute case. But it was immediately apparent that the patient was suffering with pneumonia. He was a business man about 55 years old. I told my friend that I had some of the best old brandy that money could buy down at my house, and recommended its immediate use. The doctor came down and got some of it for the patient, and a few days ago the patient himself called on me, entirely recovered. There are some people who would take the position that God had helped cure him, but he would have been in a bad plight without the brandy.

"My old friend the late Dr. Edward

G. Janeway when he had pneumonia employed one medication especially—brandy. I believe that Dr. Jacobi would support me in this contention that, all the world over, humanity is liable to be overworked, temporarily weakened by shock; in fact, in a condition which calls aloud for a stimulant, and for something more palatable to the taste, more rapid in its restoration of vigor, than smelling salts, sal volatile, or even a cup of beef tea. I agree with Dr. Jacobi, who thinks that the time will hardly come when alcohol will no longer be used in illness. That time must never come. There are conditions which absolutely demand the use of alcohol. Furthermore, I am in absolute accord with him and other experienced practitioners in that I do not care to class alcohol anywhere. It has been called, or eulogized, as a stimulant, a sedative, an anesthetic, an inhibitory and depressant power, and so on. It has been called a paralyzer.

"But in cases of diphtheria with children I would use the best distilled liquor. The liquor must be the very best. I do not refer to the stuff that is ordinarily sold and which should be thrown out, all of it. Good whisky and brandy are the oil of old age. If I couldn't get a little stimulant with my meals I'd have dyspepsia. I don't believe in cocktails, but a little old whisky or brandy of superior quality is helpful to the elderly.

"I am not making these observations for any other reason in the world than because I believe they should be uttered in the cause of truth. They are not made as a result of a lot of experiments with healthy or diseased guinea pigs, dogs, and monkeys. I have been a practitioner all these years, and in rubbing up against humanity have learned certain things. I have learned them by experience, not from guinea pigs. One of the best laboratories is the hospital and sickroom. It is superior to an experiment on a dog or a monkey. That the abuse of alcohol is fraught with great dangers and brings with it injurious consequences of many kinds, both to the individual and to society, is the principal fact established by all experience and the point of departure of the whole alcohol question and alcohol investigation.

"Dr. Jacobi, to refer once more to my long-time friend whom I greatly revere, has found in his experience that the hospital and private bedside have the advantage over an experiment on a dog or a rabbit, for while the experimenter on the animals is not infrequently devoid of clinical observation when he publishes his result,

the clinician seldom, if ever, appeals to the attention of his peers before he has confirmed his observations by scores of cases. Hippocrates, the great, says more frequently than any of his successors, 'it seems to me.' After forty-odd years I trust in alcohol as a powerful remedy in cases of diphtheritic and other sepsis.

"The lives of most men in the medical profession are spent in the endeavor to diminish suffering and eliminate the perils which beset humanity, and just now, of course, the question of the care of the wounded in Europe is one of the great problems of modern military surgery and of humanitarianism, in so far as that is left in man. I think soldiers should be permitted to carry good old whisky or brandy with them into battle in what we in the civil war used to call our canteens. If a poor chap had some tablets of strophanthus on his person they would also help in time of need. The whisky or brandy should be with the soldier for use only in case of emergency along with the other first-aid treatments.

"I have used liquor in treatment of typhoid fever over and over again. Science is one thing; medicine is an art. Today it is practiced as a science. You can't take care of sick people with a science. You must take into account the personal equation. There is no such thing as disease per se: there is a patient with a trouble. A man may practice medicine for half a century and never see two patients alike in all that time. If a man were dying of Bright's disease I wouldn't prescribe liquor for him. But it is this radicalism to which I am opposed—this bone-dry prohibition crusade. Alcohol has its place in medicine; treating should be done away with. There you have the two extremes. I consider the habit of barroom treating one of the most vicious things in existence. I have taken wine and water ever since I was a youngster. I despise water—it gives me dyspepsia. Just now I'm drinking with my meals some very good whisky—a present from a patient.

"I should like to say a parting word, so that my position may be the better understood, to the effect that I consider the medical profession to be composed, in the main, of the noblest of God's children. Along with the elevation of medicine and surgery to that high plane which they now occupy has gone a more general prevalence of a high and broad humanity among its members. But I also say that there is a lot of tommyrot in present-day surgery. Not very many operations for appendicitis are really required. In connection with humanity's appendix there has been a perfect slaughter of the innocents. There is an element which has crept into this noblest of all professions which is commercial to the last degree. On the one hand a doctor's house rent is due, and he must keep up his automobiles—and over there is a patient whose appendix may be removed for a fee of from \$500 to, say, \$1,500. It is frightful. The poor fellow under those circumstances is frequently cut open.

"The war is, therefore, a very bright spot in that it will act as an immense neutralizing agent in medical quarters. Already it is having this effect. But when you find a beggar who has made a fortune in the medical profession, unless he is extremely talented, it means there is something wrong. After everything possible has been said of the division of medical practice into specialties, of the necessity of the poorly paid combining to secure co-operative insurance and best medical treatment in their homes at a low rate, the field of the family doctor is still a large one and the demand for his services will ever remain, and a sorry day it will be when his influence has been lost and his interest forfeited. And who ever heard of such a man as that making a large fortune in the practice of his profession? We mustn't get too far away from such men as Weelum MacLure, the doctor of Drumtochty."