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Samuel David Gross: The Lesson of His Life and Labors

William Williams Keen M.D.

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A EULOGY PRONOUNCED

AT THE

EIGHTY-FIFTH ANNUAL COMMENCEMENT

OF THE

JEFFERSON MEDICAL COLLEGE

OF PHILADELPHIA

June 6th, 1910

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It is eminently fitting that an Institution should commemorate the Life and Services of its great men and especially its great teachers. In 1925, only fifteen years hence, the Jefferson Medical College will celebrate the completion of the first century of its existence and it will then recall all its splendid galaxy of teachers from George McClellan, Daniel Drake, and Nathan R. Smith to Dunglison, Mitchell, Pancoast, the Grosses, Meigs, DaCosta, and others scarcely less distinguished. To-day I can only speak of one—but he a Prince of our Profession—Samuel David Gross.

How gladly would I recall also the services of his able son, Samuel W. Gross, who for seven years adorned and magnified his distinguished father's chair, and was one of my own generation and my friend. But the short time at my disposal forbids me to enter upon what would be to me a most grateful task.

The elder Gross was born in 1805 and died at the age of 79 in 1884—twenty-six years ago, before most of you who to-day have won your doctorate were born. With the lapse of time and the passing away of those who knew him personally you younger men can hardly be expected to realize what a great man he was—what an asset his name and fame were and ought still to be

*A Eulogy pronounced at the Commencement of the Jefferson Medical College June 6th, 1910, in celebration of the Endowment of the Samuel David Gross Professorship of Surgery.

to the Jefferson Medical College. I, therefore, beg leave to sketch briefly his Life and Labors and to draw some lessons therefrom for your guidance and inspiration.

This pleasant duty is made doubly welcome to-day because we inaugurate the "Samuel David Gross Chair of Surgery"—the first endowed chair in the Jefferson Medical College, but other similar endowments I hope will quickly follow lest the Gross chair should feel conspicuously lonely.

I do not believe any children have ever been more steadfastly loyal to their father and more jealous of his fame than the children of Professor Gross. To-day, after many other proofs of their loving remembrance, as a further evidence of filial affection, his daughter, Mrs. Maria Gross Horwitz, whose enforced absence we all regret, by a munificent endowment forever links his name with the Institution he loved so well and to which he added such lustre.

And now, Gentlemen, I have the pleasure and the honor of presenting to you as the unanimous choice of the Trustees the first "Samuel David Gross Professor of Surgery"—one taught by Gross himself, first my assistant, later my colleague in the Faculty, and always my friend—Professor J. Chalmers DaCosta.

Professor Gross' early education was rather meager, but note its final fulness. Born near Easton, Pa., his childhood's language was the patois called "Pennsylvania Dutch." Pure German he only acquired by diligent study. Even at fifteen his knowledge of English was very imperfect. This, too, he mastered and spoke it with ease and fluency, and wrote it lucidly and correctly. At seventeen he began the study of medicine in a country doctor's office, but soon found that his intellectual tools were inadequate, since he knew little Latin and no Greek. Did this boy of seventeen recoil from the difficult task of learning two new dead languages? Not he! He was made of sterner stuff. "This," he declares, "was

the turning point in my life. . . . I had made a great discovery—a knowledge of my ignorance and with it came a solemn determination to remedy it." He abandoned the study of medicine for the time and set himself diligently at work on his preliminary education. The boy who at 14 could renounce cards because they were becoming his master, three years later wrestled successfully with Latin and then making this victory subserve another and greater one, he attacked Greek. This he studied with a Dictionary and a Grammar both written in Latin. To these five languages he soon added both French and Italian.

Young men, how many languages do you now know, and how many more are you determined to know? You may omit Pennsylvania Dutch and even Italian, but the other five you *must* know if you are to take rank in the forefront among the scholars of our Profession.

At nineteen he recommenced his medical course and graduated in 1828 at the age of twenty-three. What did he do then when he was a full fledged Doctor? At Easton, where he soon settled, he built a dissecting room in the rear of his garden, drove to Philadelphia and brought back with him as a quiet but uncanny fellow-passenger—literally a "dead head"—a cadaver and spent hours daily in its dissection. He also began writing a book on Descriptive Anatomy. Nor was this all. Within two years after graduating, he translated and published four French and German books, an Anatomy, Medicine, Obstetrics, and Surgery, and published a work of his own on the Bones and Joints.

Very probably after you have framed your diploma you will scarcely have more early patients than he, but I am sure you cannot have more industry and determination, nor a larger crop from such good seed. Nor was he provided with means sufficient to do all this work as recreation. He and the splendid woman who stood nobly at his side during his early struggles and shared

graciously in his later triumphs, were rash enough to be married soon after his graduation. Well may he say then that his stimulus to work was "My ambition and my poverty." While at Easton in 1832 the call of duty to risk his own life for the sake of humanity came to him and he showed again the heroic stuff that he was made of. "In 1832, that most dreaded of all scourges, Asiatic cholera, for the first time broke out all over this country with the greatest virulence. Easton was only eighty miles from New York and the citizens, in terror lest the dread disease would reach their own town, appointed a young, intrepid surgeon to visit New York and learn what he could do for their benefit. When others were fleeing in frightened thousands from the pestilence, Gross bravely went directly into the very midst of it, reaching New York when the epidemic was at its very height. In that then small and half-depopulated town 385 persons died on the very day of his arrival—and he stayed there a week in a hot July, visiting only its hospitals and its charnel-houses. What call you that but the highest type of bravery?—a bravery which Norfolk and Mobile and Memphis and New Orleans have since seen repeated by scores of courageous physicians ready to sacrifice their lives for their fellowmen with no blare of trumpets, no roar of cannon, no cheer of troops, no plaudits of the press! No battlefield ever saw greater heroes; no country braver men!"

In 1833, five years after graduating, he went to Cincinnati as Demonstrator of Anatomy for two years and as Professor of Pathological Anatomy for the following five years. Cincinnati at that time was a small town almost on the frontier of civilization containing less than 30,000 inhabitants. Yet this young man of thirty, whose opportunities for post-mortems must have been few, resolutely set himself to work and in 1839 published the very first work on Pathological Anatomy in the English language. Contrast his opportunities with those of Roki-

tansky of Vienna, whose book published five years later (1844) was based upon the data from more than 30,000 post-mortems! No wonder that in 1869 at a dinner tendered to the then distinguished Professor Gross at which were present von Langenbeck, von Graefe, Donders, Gurlt, and others, Virchow, the Prince of Pathologists, should hold up this very book and in an eloquent speech should compliment their guest upon such a notable achievement. The book soon brought him fame and practice. Its second edition made him a member of the Imperial Royal Pathological Society of Vienna.

Excepting one year in New York as the successor of the famous Valentine Mott, Dr. Gross was Professor of Surgery in the University of Louisville from 1840 to 1856. These sixteen years gave him the surgical sceptre of the Mississippi Valley. But to justify this primacy he published still other works, the result of unremitting labor. In 1843 appeared his book on "Wounds of the Intestines"; in 1851 that on the "Urinary Organs," and in 1864 that on "Foreign Bodies in the Air Passages," also a pioneer and most valuable work justly lauded by Sir Morell Mackenzie, the eminent English Laryngologist.

Meanwhile he had been invited not only to New York, but to New Orleans, to the University of Virginia, and to the University of Pennsylvania, but excepting the year in New York, he refused them all until the one call which he could not refuse came to him—that he should come to his own beloved Alma Mater—the Jefferson—as successor to McClellan and Mütter, and colleague of Pancoast, Dunglison, and J. K. Mitchell.

In 1856 he entered upon his labors as Professor of Surgery in the Jefferson Medical College, a post he not only held but made it still more famous, and which he only relinquished in 1882, after twenty-six years of splendid service in the Jefferson and forty-nine years of continuous teaching.

But though he had thus reached the summit of his ambition, success, instead of singing a lullaby for honored rest and sleep, uttered a clarion call to further and more fruitful labors.

In 1859—fortunately for me the year before I began my medical studies—his great System of Surgery in two large volumes was published. It passed through six editions, the last in 1882, only seventeen months before his death. This last edition was noteworthy in that at seventy-seven years of age his open mind reversed the ideas of half a century and he frankly accepted the doctrines of antisepsis, even then still struggling for recognition. More men have learned their Surgery from its pages than from any other text-book in our language. It was translated into several European languages and spread his fame and that of the Jefferson all over the world.

Let me here anticipate a little and call your attention to two almost unknown incidents in his career. The first was pointed out by Mr. Patterson DuBois at the meeting of the American Philosophical Society barely six weeks ago. With the great Japanese Embassy of 1860, the first Occidental Embassy sent out by Japan, there were two physicians, Measaki and Moryama. These two with the Governor and the interpreter saw a private operation for lithotomy by Professor Gross. Morton himself gave the ether. "This was a revelation to the Orientals. They smelt and poured the ether on their hands astonished by the coldness from its evaporation. After the operation they carefully examined the instruments and showed so much interest in the whole subject that they were invited to attend the Jefferson Medical College clinic. Forty-six years later (February, 1906), in an address delivered before the students of the Jefferson Medical College by Baron Takaki, Surgeon-General of the Japanese Navy, he said, 'Japanese surgery is founded on the teachings of Dr. Samuel D. Gross, for

so many years surgeon to the splendid Medical College in which we are gathered. Dr. Gross' System of Surgery, translated into German, was taken up by my countrymen and re-translated into Japanese, and upon that has been built up Japanese surgery as practiced to-day.'" (DuBois.)

The second is, I think, still less well known. It is recorded by the great Viennese surgeon, Billroth, in the preface to his "Chirurgische Klinik," published in Berlin in 1879, as follows:

"It was at the beginning of my teaching in Vienna. I was giving a course of public lectures on tumors and devoted an hour to the lymphomata, alluding to our ignorance of the etiology of these new growths and our therapeutical helplessness in respect to this, alas, so frequent disease. In the crowded amphitheater during the lecture I had already observed on one of the upper benches an old gentleman whose fine head and distinguished figure had attracted my attention. Our eyes constantly exchanged sympathetic glances. At the conclusion of the lecture, as I was collecting my drawings, this gentleman came to me and stretching out his hand said to me with a slight English accent, 'I am delighted to have heard your lecture. You have spoken the truth to your pupils—a thing one does not always hear.' This message gratified me all the more when the gentleman gave me his name, Professor Samuel D. Gross of Philadelphia, the most distinguished surgeon of the United States, known also as one of the noblest characters of his country. Among the testimonies to my scientific and humanitarian efforts this message always will remain as a most valued commendation and one that I can never forget."

When the Civil War broke out he wrote an admirable Manual of Military Surgery in nine days. In five more it was on sale, was soon republished in Richmond and largely guided the practice of the surgeons of both

armies. Later it too was translated into Japanese. Towards the end of his life he also wrote a full Autobiography.

Besides all these nine formal and extensive publications, he wrote numerous monographs, many of them of considerable length, and was Editor of several medical journals and books. He founded three societies—the Philadelphia Pathological Society, the Philadelphia Academy of Surgery, and the American Surgical Association, and took an active part in the American Medical Association and other medical societies.

When he entered upon his duties at the Jefferson he uttered these solemn words, "whatever of life and of health and of strength remain to me I hereby, in the presence of Almighty God and of this large assemblage, dedicate to the cause of my Alma Mater, to the interest of medical science, and to the good of my fellow-creatures." Was ever a pledge more conscientiously, more successfully, more devotedly fulfilled! In all your years of future service, gentlemen, may you also thus dedicate *your* lives to your Alma Mater, to your profession and to humanity.

Such untiring, I may even say Herculean labors as writer, teacher, and surgeon made him known all over the world and brought him many well deserved honors. He was a member of a score of American medical and scientific societies, and honorary member of nearly a dozen similar European societies, besides the unique honor of receiving their highest degrees from Oxford, Cambridge, and Edinburgh. It is touching to remember that this last and the Doctorate of Laws of the University of Pennsylvania were received while he was on his deathbed, and that the last two papers from his busy pen were read, one before the American Surgical Association on April 30, 1884, only six days before his death, and the other before the American Medical Association on May 6th, two days after his death.

His remains, I am glad to add, were cremated.

But the death of even the greatest men cannot be allowed to halt the world's progress. In the twenty-six years since he passed away, this progress has been enormous. Imagine, if you please, that he should reappear to us in the flesh, his tall courtly form impressive in appearance, his handsome face aglow with interest, his alert mind expectant and receptive, gazing upon our splendid new buildings, college, laboratory, and hospital, he would think, "surely I have gone astray. This cannot be my own dearly beloved Jefferson. But I will enter and see."

How he would then glory in all the evidences of growth and progress; the practical personal teaching of each individual student in Ward Class, Out-Patient Department, and Laboratory; the four years' course of study extended even to a voluntary and before long a required fifth year; the clinical and especially the original researches within those walls! With what deep interest he would view Coplin's epidiascope, read DaCosta's book on the Blood, and examine the Sphygmomanometer. How he would gloat over Coplin's Pathology, another DaCosta's Modern Surgery, and the many text-books of his distinguished pupils and others of the more than six score busy teachers of the Jefferson. But how puzzled he would be to hear of Opsonins and Agglutinins, of Amboceptors and Haptophors, of Antibodies and Anaphylaxis, words of whose very meaning he would not have even the faintest idea.

How often I have heard him say to the orderly, "Hugh get me a tumbler of laudable pus for my lecture to-morrow morning," for in the sixties and early seventies in the little hospital of only fifteen beds, pus was always "on tap." But now he would wander through the wards in a vain search for his old friend "laudable pus."

And the Surgical Clinic! At first when he saw their audacity, I fear he would think that DaCosta and Gibbon had gone stark mad; but when he would see also their success he would fervently thank God that such extraordinary power and blessed mastery over disease and accident had been achieved by his successors.

But are there no lessons from this noble life for my fellow-citizens of Philadelphia as well as for you my young friends? Yea, verily.

In the twenty-six years since his death, every department of medicine has developed amazingly and the promise is that in the next twenty-six years discoveries of wider and farther reaching importance will follow. I do not hesitate to predict that within that period the cause and it may even be the cure of cancer—without operation, thank God—will be discovered, possibly by one of you young gentlemen; the serum treatment of many diseases, or it may well be a treatment better than that by serums will enable us to cure where now we are almost helpless; little children instead of suffering from measles, scarlet fever, whooping cough and other, as we grimly name them "*usual diseases* of childhood," will revel in the "*usual health* of childhood."

But for these achievements we need men who will devote their lives to research, and money to pay these men living salaries. Fellow-citizens, we will furnish you these devoted men. Will you furnish us the money?

For many years Philadelphia has been the acknowledged centre of the medical world in the United States. But our supremacy is threatened on every side. On the North, Chicago has raised millions for her medical schools. On the East, Harvard has recently received five millions for a new medical school, and five more for a hospital, while in New York, Columbia, Cornell and Bellevue follow hard in the wake of Harvard. On the South, Johns Hopkins has received other millions and Tulane in New Orleans a million. On the West, in St. Louis,

the ink is hardly dry on the papers making gifts to Washington University of five millions more for its medical department alone.

Who will give five millions to the Jefferson?

What, you ask, do we want them for? For more and larger buildings, for new departments, for laboratories, for a well-equipped maternity department, for larger children's wards, for research students, for living salaries to men who will devote their lives to the solution of the many as yet unsolved problems of disease, for other endowed chairs which will make the institution independent of its income from students and, therefore, free to exact the highest requirements demanded by the age we live in.

Unless the citizens of Philadelphia know and realize what other medical centres are doing and give millions instead of thousands, our medical schools will languish and fall behind other and better endowed schools. But I do not believe that our wealthy men—more in number and of greater wealth surely than those of St. Louis—will allow this threatened evil to come to pass. They will rally around our great schools and make them of far greater importance and capable of far richer service to humanity than even in the days of Samuel David Gross.

Finally, may I state a few facts to show that the Jefferson is worthy of such a large endowment?

The Jefferson Hospital ministered to the needs of over 5,000 patients in its wards last year, to 615 patients every day in the Out-Patient clinics and to one accident case every hour in the entire year.

It has sent its graduates all over this country and all over the world to help the sick and maimed.

It has educated its graduates up to the very highest standard. No one incident shows this better than the recent Civil Service examination for Internes at the Philadelphia General Hospital, when 90 candidates were

examined. The Jefferson men passed more splendidly than those not only of any other medical school in this city, but better than the graduates of any medical school at any previous time.

Of the first 19 men who were successful, every one was a Jefferson man, except two, the 4th and the 13th. The general average of the Jefferson men was nearly 3 per cent. higher than the average of the graduates of any other Philadelphia medical school, and the per centage of failures was less than those in any other medical school.

As to hospitals in this city other than the Philadelphia General Hospital, in nine the first place was taken by a Jefferson man; in seven the second place was also taken by Jefferson men; and in five hospitals, every position as resident was captured by a Jefferson man. Besides this, in hospitals outside of Philadelphia, 43 appointments were won by Jefferson men. Such a showing reflects the greatest credit on you gentlemen of the Board of Trustees, upon you gentlemen of the Faculty, and all the other instructors and quiz masters, and especially upon the present graduating class.

This record is simply unexampled. I feel proud of you young men of the class of 1910. As is appropriate for Jefferson men and for this occasion, you have won laurels, not by the dozen, but by the Gross.