

# Abrams: An Appreciation

## Abrams' Methods of Diagnosis & Treatment

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### Edited by Sir James Barr, 1925

An attempt is being made in the following pages to explain the principles underlying the original research work carried out by the late Dr. Albert Abrams during the last ten or fifteen years of his life.

The subject is necessarily of intense interest to every one, for the reader will quickly perceive that if Abrams ideas are correct, they are the most epoch making ever introduced into the realm of Medicine.

Who, then, was Abrams? What manner of man was he? What are his credentials?

He was born in San Francisco sixty-two years ago, the son of wealthy and cultured parents who planned that he should complete his education at Balliol College, Oxford. A visit to Heidelberg, however, decided Abrams that he would prefer to study in the University of that city. Ad he elected to adopt medicine as a career.

In due course he obtained his MD degree, and after an extended tour of the European clinics, in the course of which he formed friendships with such men as Virchow, Wasserman, Langerhans, etc., he returned to his native town and eventually won for himself a national reputation as a specialist in diseases of the nervous system. At the time of the celebrated Thaw trial it was Abrams who sent for to examine and report on the mental responsibility of Stanford's assassin.

For a long time Abrams was Professor of Pathology, and Director of the Medical Clinic of the Cooper Medical College, and Leland Stanford University of California; among many other positions of honor he that that of President of the San Francisco Medical Chirurgical Society.

Abrams was the author of many medical text-books, the most important and voluminous of the published works being a treatise on the original researches on the subject of the spinal nerve reflexes. The work was translated in to various foreign

languages, and ran through five editions in four years, and was hailed by the grave New York Medical journal as "a treatise of extraordinary interest and usefulness," while another of his books was described by The British Journal of Tuberculosis as "an erudite and elaborate study of new conceptions."

It is right, and indeed most necessary, that such facts as are detailed above are known, so that the current lie representing Abrams as a sort of mountebank without medical knowledge, degrees, or scientific credentials should be nailed to the counter.

Another malicious invention deliberately circulated by Abrams' enemies represents him as a grasping Shylock with an obsession-not with healing the sick but with making money. The truth is Abrams - a man of simple desires living a Spartan life- had inherited a vast fortune and far more money than either he needed or could spend. The writer remembers a pathetic episode which occurred one morning "between cases" in the clinic. "All you fellows go off and enjoy yourselves in your various ways: said Abrams' "and I dare say some of you envy me. You don't know. Money has never brought me happiness, for there's some devil inside me driving me and goading me to always work. My work is my life; I can't get away from it. I have never known what it is to have what most people call a good time."

It is true Abrams charges high fees, as other men of acknowledged eminence do, and he charged high prices to the medical men who wished to purchase the instruments he devised and controlled; moreover he demanded a monthly royalty on every instrument which left his factory.

These facts, plus the fact that Abrams bore a Jewish name, lent color to the suggestion, skillfully fostered by his traducers, that acquisitiveness was the outstanding characteristic of his nature.

The truth-which the writer can vouch for is so different. The truth is, that the whole of the money earned by Abrams during the last several years of his life-from consultations and treatment of patients, to teaching, from profits on the sale of his apparatus, from royalties-went into a trust-fund administered by a Committee, the object of which was to found and permanently endow, at the earliest possible date and immense Hospital and College in San Francisco, where necessitous patients could be treated gratis and where the teaching of Abrams' methods, and further research work, could be carried on in ideal conditions.

This Hospital was to be named "The Blanche and Jean R. Abrams memorial" after the names of the two wives who predeceased him. To this object Abrams contributed an immense sum out of his private accounts, and two months before his death he saw the foundation stone laid. It was stipulated in the will that the bulk of his huge inheritance should be added to the sum already in the hands of the Hospital trustees.

A childless widower, Abrams working ceaselessly and feverishly, to develop and perfect methods of diagnosis and treatment which he conscientiously believed would revolutionize Medicine and the outlook for suffering humanity. Like other pioneers who dared to upset established order, he met with furious opposition, some no doubt perfectly sincere, some political (anti-Semitic), some because his treatment threatened vested interests.

But Abram's was a fighter with very broad shoulders to bear his burdens, and although the attacks to which he was ceaselessly subjected heightened the irritability which he whimsically deplored, nothing altered, of could alter the sweetness and patience which lay beneath the surface. Everyone suffered sooner or later from one of his explosions of rage; but everyone who knew him loved him, and awaited the inevitable apology. It always came. " Don't take the slightest notice of me doctor," he would say and perhaps a few minuets later he would add with a characteristic twinkle. " I expect I only took one liver pill this morning; of course I ought to have taken two"

Abrams was a born humorist. And his lectures were full of brilliant epigrams "We are all omnibuses in which our tainted ancestors ride" is a famous Abrams mot which occurs to the writer.

Another characteristic was his passion-in moments of relaxation - for trying out seemingly fantastic experiments. Generally there were undertaken as a break in the middle of a morning's more serious hard work. And often he would preface what he was about to do with some joking remark to the effect that, as half the world had made up its mind that he was crazy, it didn't matter what he did.. "But," turning to the class, "don't any of you start dong this sort of thing or you will find yourselves in my boat."

Some of these experiments Abrams-rather unwisely- described in a monthly magazine, the Psysico-Clinical journal, which he edited, and the opportunity was not lost by his enemies of using them as weapons with to belittle the more serious work of a great scientist and teacher.

As an example of one of Abrams' more bizarre experiments, one might instance an attempt to prove that plants could suffer pain. The experiment was interesting, and Abrams, as always, concentrated the whole of his tremendous energy upon it; but that he did not regard such an interlude in the serious way his critics are pleased to pretend. Is proved by the characteristic phrase; "Come on now, let's stop fooling and get back to work"

'Fooling!' one wonders. Abrams would describe anything as fooling which was not directly concerned with the routine work of the that day. But he was never trivial, and the on looker could not but feel at all times that he was in the presence of a man of genius and of vision who was groping for the light which he inwardly knew would one day illumine places at present very dark.

He worked hard to that end; only a day or two before his death from pneumonia he insisted on taking his usual place in the Clinic and demonstrating his own condition to his class. His work was in his thoughts to the last. " They jeer at my work and my methods now." He said as he lay dying "but someday they will know I was right."

Perhaps the most telling phrase used by Sir Thomas Horder in this recent address on the subject of Abrams ad his work as follows:

'The fundamental propositions originally announced by Abrams, must be regarded as established to a very high degree of probability.'

Many years ago an inventor described a boat that he was hoping to build which would, he said, be capable of crossing from Liver pool to Boston by the power of steam.

A great mathematician and scientist promptly wrote a book in which he conclusively proved that such a thing could never be.

That book was carried to Boston on the maiden voyage in question, and is now a cherished possession of the Boston Museum.