

DR. J. M. T. FINNEY: MASTER SURGEON, HUMANIST, ROLE MODEL

By Michael Nevins

I'd never heard of Dr. John Miller Turpin Finney until Dr. Marvin Stone discussed him at the 2015 meeting of the American Osler Society in Baltimore. As Dr. Stone explained, J.M.T. Finney (he favored using the three initials rather than his first name) was born in Natchez, Mississippi in 1863 in the midst of a Civil War battle; he played football both at Princeton and also during his first year at Harvard Medical School, and he was a colleague of Osler at Johns Hopkins from the hospital's opening day. He was a fine gastrointestinal surgeon who worked under Halstead for 33 years and after the chief died, temporarily served as chairman of the Department of Surgery. Finney refused a permanent appointment, partially because he was an opponent of the full-time system which he felt interfered with the doctor-patient relationship. Dr. Finney was universally respected as having outstanding moral values – perhaps reflecting the fact that his grandfather, father and brother all were Presbyterian ministers.

Small wonder that when the American College of Surgeons was formed in 1913 to elevate standards of practice, J.M.T. Finney was unanimously elected as its first president because he was felt to represent the best of American surgery and would be a fine role model of what the college wished to achieve. In his inaugural address to some five hundred members, Dr. Finney noted that the profession was tainted by commercialism, graft, quackery and “the demoralizing practice of fee-splitting.” He asserted that in the fledgling surgical society, “There shall be no room for the base, the unscrupulous, the ignorant or the unskilled.” The term “surgeon” should mean “something more than a suave manner, a glib tongue, a private hospital, a press agent, and the all too easily acquired diploma... The conception and formation of the American College of Surgeons is simply a *bone fide* effort upon the part of the profession to cleanse its escutcheon of some of the dark blots with which it is stained.” The public needed to be protected from ignorant surgeons who lacked sufficient training, especially “those who would prostitute their high office for the purpose of gain....Unless one's ideals are of the

highest, one's efforts in this direction are foredoomed to failure. Character and efficiency of service are our battle cry. They are the principles fundamental to the success of our cause." J.M.T. Finney's high-minded Presidential Address, which came just three years after The Flexner Report, deplored the state of American medical education: "Our medical colleges are, on the whole, so far below the standard set by the rest of the civilized world that it shames us to make a comparison." But with reform, "the medical colleges, the fountainhead of the evils [described] will be shamed out of turning loose upon the public such material as in the past -- raw, crude and unfinished as much of it has been."

J.M.T. Finney had entered the College of New Jersey in 1884 (a dozen years before it was renamed Princeton University) where both his father and grandfather had studied. When Woodrow Wilson resigned the presidency of Princeton in 1912 to become Governor of New Jersey, the job was offered to the 49 year old physician who, only two years earlier, had been elected a life trustee of the school. After much soul searching, Finney declined the honor, preferring to continue training young physicians at Johns Hopkins -- as he wrote, "I feel that I am better fitted for the work which I am doing and that I should remain in Baltimore where my work is not yet done."

Dr. Finney's lengthy autobiography, *A Surgeon's Life*, published in 1940 about two years before his death, contained entertaining anecdotes about friends, colleagues and patients -- among the latter Presidents T. Roosevelt, Wilson, Harding and Coolidge and their families. But Finney was not an elitist and in his memoirs wrote fondly of his "Mammy" who had raised him in the rural South and how many years later he'd tracked her down and spoke lovingly in dialect to the now blind old lady. He also enjoyed bantering with black soldiers and hospital orderlies during World War I and during his long career at Hopkins, he pioneered in recruitment and training of black surgeons.

When J.M.T. Finney died in 1942, his obituary contained statements such as “idealistic in his attitudes,” “unyielding in his principles,” “selfless,” “inspiring young men and women,” and “ideal physician.” A college friend recalled that Finney “was compounded of many elements: physical strength and vitality, intellectual vigor and versatility, moral purity, social warmth and loving-kindness.” On his gravestone is engraved “who went around doing good.”

All of that was inspiring, but there was something else which interested me -- for, in his American Osler Society address in Baltimore, Marvin Stone mentioned that in 1923 a book had been published based on a series of talks that Finney gave “from time to time to the students composing the Medical Club of Princeton University” -- his alma mater. This indirectly related to my favorite subject – the medical history of New Jersey where I lived and worked for more than four decades -- and I wondered what this paragon of virtue had to say to this “group of college students who had not yet begun their life work.” The book, titled simply *The Physician*, was part of a Vocational Series published by Charles Scribner’s Sons and I was able to borrow a copy from Princeton’s Firestone Library. What follows here are several selections which reflect Dr. Finney’s wisdom and, to my mind, still resonate nearly a century later.

PREVENTION: There is a crying need for the exercise of preventive medicine [as] emphasized by the fact that the medical examinations made during the draft of our army during the recent great war showed over 33 percent of men in the draft age to be physically unfit for military service....We are confronted today with the extraordinary spectacle of large bodies of supposedly intelligent men and women who are using every effort to obstruct and prevent the employment of methods in the control and prevention of disease, which means in turn, the prevention and relief of untold suffering and the saving of countless human lives.

STUDYING MEDICAL HISTORY: Familiarity upon the part of the young physician with the biographies of the leaders of the profession, past and present;

with the history of medicine and the various phases and vicissitudes through which it has passed from the earliest times to the present, will well repay him in every way for the time and effort necessary to acquire it.

MEDICINE AS A CALLING: The medical profession... is a vast protective force, an army organized and recruited for combat with disease and for the preservation and restoration of health....All that it asks...as a right, not as a favor, is that it should be allowed to minister to the needs of the public along well-established lines, unhampered by foolish and reactionary cults and the various societies of the "antis." [e.g. anti-vivisection, anti-vaccination, etc]

IMAGE: To the man about to enter upon the study of medicine, or to the medical student, the fundamental aims of medicine should be made very clear, and they should likewise ever be kept in view by the practitioner. As handed down by the fathers from the best traditions of the guild and practiced by the best element in the profession, its chief aims are the relief of suffering, the study and cure of disease and the advancement of knowledge. Happily the gold-headed cane, the high hat and frock coat, the professional manner and the fine equipage are things of the past as necessary adjuncts to and as indices of the professional standing of the doctor. To be sure, even in this enlightened day and generation they or their substitutes, the limousine and liveried chauffeur and the office-boy, and the officious secretary or business agent are affected by a certain class of the profession....Unfortunately, it is true that these external factors do carry some weight with a certain class of the public, that particular group referred to by Mr. Lincoln as those "who can be fooled all the time," and who really seem to like it.

CHARACTER: First of the requisites in a physician we would put integrity of character, worthiness to be trusted under all the trying circumstances that are inseparably connected with the practice of medicine in all of its branches. In return for these services, the financial rewards should afford a decent living income for the doctor and his family, but the standards should be such that the

altruistic nature of their profession should never be lost sight of by its members. The attention of all physicians worthy of the name is, therefore, to be directed at all times toward the service of their fellow men rather than the making of money. Hence it is that the tendency of some to demand excessive fees in return for their professional services, no matter how valuable, should be discouraged as savoring of commercialism and tending to discredit the entire profession.....[Medical practice] brings few to fame and renown. It is hard work, never finished in any eight or eighteen hours a day; but its rewards, as I see them, are beyond those of any other profession.

HUMAN NATURE: One of the interesting and inexplicable peculiarities of human nature is that so many people who are perfectly sane and sensible about other things are so utterly unreasonable and foolish when it comes to questions relating to their physical well-being. They will so frequently fail utterly to apply the same law of reason and common sense that they unhesitatingly apply in other relations in life to matters that concern their health and bodily functions. They will often go chasing after strange gods and for a time worship ardently and devotedly in any so-called temple of hygiene, no matter how bizarre or absurdly constructed it may be until it is often too late....This is a free country and one can do as he pleases in a matter of this sort and the individual injury to his own health resulting from faulty medical treatment or lack of any at all, as in faith healing and Christian Science, except in the case of communicable diseases, is a matter that concerns himself and his family. But the chief danger from these cults....which is the only reason for paying any attention to them at all, is through their efforts to break down medical-practice laws and the confusion that they are causing in medical licensure.

GENERAL PRACTICE: The general practitioner is, and probably will always remain, the most important single factor in the practice of medicine. As a necessary corollary, then, the most important function of our medical schools is to train well-qualified general practitioners. Every other function must be held

subservient to this....It will be a sorry day for humanity if the type of general practitioner, the family guide, philosopher and friend ever becomes extinct. The world and society will be the loser. He may not be able to recognize and call by name many of the rarer and more modern differentiations of disease conditions, but he has something that the individual needs and that nothing else quite supplies.

GROUP MEDICINE: This recent development...has come to stay. It has arisen to fill a need recognized and felt by the profession more keenly than by the general public...It is simply a development of the idea of the division of labor and specialization of function applied to modern medicine, This idea has been tried out in various quarters for some time past. Experience has shown that it is capable of high development and may be productive of most satisfactory results. On the other hand, as in most things, there is the possibility for great harm and injustice to the public from combinations of unscrupulous individuals to exploit the sick, especially the large class of neurotics, for their own pecuniary advantage.

COMPASSION: If there is one quality that my thirty or more years of professional experience has impressed upon me as of the utmost importance in the medical man, no matter whether in city or country practice, a general practitioner or a specialist, it is that he should have a heart. Courtesy of manner and kindness go a long way toward establishing that basis of mutual understanding and confidence so important in the diagnosis and treatment of many conditions, especially that large class of functional neuroses which are the natural prey of the faith-healers and the quacks. The world today is sick, suffering grievously from war wounds...What it needs is not physic; neither science nor the healing art can cure its wounds, nationally and internationally, individually and collectively, but only the application of those principles taught by the Great Physician, "Love thy neighbor as thyself," "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." What is true of a nation is true of individuals. Kindly sympathy, friendly and not necessarily always professional advice or warning,

and personal interest are of greater actual value to a large class of patients suffering from real or supposed maladies than pill or potion.

These suggestions and caveats offered nearly a century ago to premedical students at Princeton displayed J.M.T. Finney at his blunt best: ever faithful to the traditions of his profession and mindful of the physician's unique opportunity to serve.