

The successful treatment of leprosy by P.G. Unna / with notes by J.L. Milton.

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THE SUCCESSFUL
TREATMENT OF LEPROSY.

BY

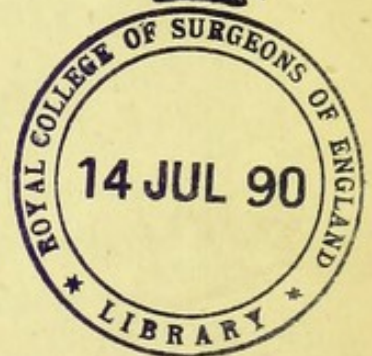
P. G. UNNA.

WITH NOTES

BY

J. L. MILTON,

Senior Surgeon to St. John's Hospital for Diseases of the Skin.

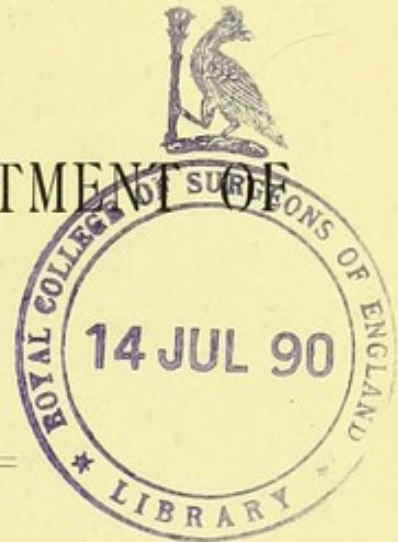


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THE SUCCESSFUL TREATMENT OF LEPROSY.



SOME considerable time ago Dr. Unna of Hamburg communicated to a medical congress held in Germany the particulars of a case in which leprosy of the worst type seemed to be quickly and thoroughly cured. The patient was a lady from Brazil, and though the disease was only of two years standing, it had extensively invaded the frame, the limbs especially being badly attacked. I need scarcely say that rapidity of progress is a most ominous sign. Moreover the conjunctivæ were seriously affected, the change of colour which precedes the kind of exfoliation seen in the later stages of the disease being already noticeable, and accompanied by photophobia. The patient had also acquired the hot penetrating smell peculiar to the leper, in itself a certain sign of deep-seated mischief.

Dr. Unna took the precaution of having the case photographed, so that the explanation of success not unfrequently tendered on such occasions, that there had been a mistake in the diagnosis, could not hold good here. Besides he was thoroughly familiar with the disease, having studied it in Norway, where it is so widely spread, and where he heard the sad confession that all treatment had been a failure; the cheering experience of those

gentlemen who recount the potent virtues of chaoul-moogra and gurghun oils, and of those who, according to the report of the College of Physicians, cure leprosy in six weeks, not having apparently penetrated so far as these northern regions.

Some histological facts which he had observed, but which however he does not particularize, having led the author of the communication to conclude that the bacillus of leprosy cannot exist without oxygen, requires indeed an ample supply of it, he resolved to begin with frictions intended to cut off the access of air. The substances employed for this purpose were chrysarobin, pyrogallic acid, resorcin and fish-oil paste; all in the form of ointment 10 p.c. strength. These ointments were rubbed in daily on different parts of the body, each part however being subjected to the operation of one remedy exclusively. The pyrogallic acid was soon abandoned, as it was found to irritate the skin seriously and even set up vesication; the chrysophanic acid did not appear to do much good, and the ichthyol and resorcin preparations were too weak. The two first were accordingly given up and the formula for the resorcin was exchanged for one of 20 p.c., while the ichthyol ointment was raised to a strength of equal parts of the oil-salt and diluting material. Unna does not say that the first trials were a failure, but his silence as to any improvement and the immediate change to a different method are significant enough with respect to his view of the results. Judging, however, by my own experience, I feel on the other hand strongly disposed to conclude that they were really of great service, indeed laid the foundation of the cure, there being in its way no greater mistake than to imagine that the curative effects of remedies for diseases

of the skin must necessarily be revealed to view directly they come into operation.

Be this as it may the result of the change was most satisfactory. The patient, it is true, could not always bear the resorcin ointment of the strength just mentioned, and it was found necessary to suspend it every now and then ; but the change for the better was so manifest that the indication to continue the use of the remedy could not be mistaken. The ichthyol preparation produced no result of this kind and was therefore never intermitted, its operation being materially assisted a little later on by giving it also internally, presumably in the shape of pills. The employment of these vigorous measures was speedily followed by the most cheering success, the symptoms generally improving. Some of the tubercles however proved refractory, and these Dr. Unna decided to attack with pyrogallic acid ointment, 5 p.c. strength. Later on resorcin was used with the view of relieving the morbid state of the mucous membrane of the nose, and a short period of respite being allowed in order that the patient might gather strength, pyrogallic acid and chrysarobin were again rubbed in, while ichthyol was given internally. At a still later period puffing of the skin was met with salicylic plaster, while the stains were attacked with mercurial.

This last course seemed to give the death-blow to all visible signs of the disease, and at the end of seventeen weeks the patient appeared to be entirely freed from it. She herself was evidently enough confident on this head, for though, while she thought she was in danger of death and disfigurement, she was profuse in her acknowledgment of the benefits which the skill of her medical attendant was bestowing on her, she now refused to attend at the Congress

and show herself; and as ingratitude of this kind very rarely assumes a rampant form till the patient feels that it can be displayed with impunity, we may, with a fair degree of certainty, assume that so far as her own sensations went the lady was nearly if not perfectly cured. Nor regarded as a test of the patient's condition is such a conviction to be rejected; on the contrary considerable value attaches to it. The most obtuse person who enters the gates of a hospital, the incorrigibly stupid patient who never can be made to understand anything else, understands at any rate how he is getting on, often quite as well as the medical man who is going to prescribe for him.

The author does not lay any claim to having effected a lasting cure. Only too much impressed with the deep-seated and intractable nature of the disease, he wisely limits himself to pointing out that such means must be supposed to possess the power of curing leprosy for the time being. He quite admits, too, that the treatment, while setting right the morbid state of the skin, may not have effected any beneficial change in the disease of the internal organs. But there is ample reason to believe that the rate of progress in one is much the same as in the other; that in every instance, in exact proportion as the skin becomes more diseased and irritable do the structures of organic life become more unfitted to execute their functions, while, with the disappearance of the morbid state of the skin, we may count with the greatest certainty on a like favourable change taking place in the internal organs. As to the fanciful notion that, as the disease recedes in the former it must gain ground in the latter, it is just as unfounded as the belief that the surgeon can effect a transmutation of this kind; the repulsion of disease of the

skin by curative means being indeed one of the figments which belong to mediæval times.

Whatever may be the issue in other cases, I think there can be no doubt that the treatment was thoroughly successful in this instance. Philosophic observers, who plume themselves on their scepticism, and who contend that the fact of a patient getting well under suitable treatment is in no way evidence that the treatment is to be credited with the cure, seeing that the same thing constantly happens under some very different, perhaps distinctly opposed, mode of management and even under none at all, will no doubt prove, to their own satisfaction at least, that the disease was not leprosy, or if leprosy, that there was simply arrest of the morbid process due to change of air, possibly of diet also; and that with the return of the patient to the place where the disease had been contracted, it would be sure to show itself again. Consequently it would not be desirable to try the method. But people who are content to depend on the senses which Heaven has given them, and to put faith in what they can see and hear for themselves, will, I think, agree with me in concluding that the beginning of the treatment and the beginning of the improvement coincided too nearly to admit of such objections being entertained. Moreover leprosy never recedes spontaneously, and it did recede in Unna's case; it never changes for the better in any air or under any kind of diet. It may stand still for years, but it no more goes back than does the shadow on the dial.

My own experience coincides closely with that of Unna. While treating a case of anæsthetic leprosy which was doing fairly well under calomel purgatives, and de Valangin's famous old remedy, the solvent solution, I received from

him the communication alluded to. I decided to give the system a fair trial, limiting it however to the second stage, that is to say, the treatment with ichthyol and resorcin only, but prescribing the former also internally in the shape of pills from the very first. The effect was excellent. The patient, though much pulled down by the disease, bore the remedies extremely well; before long both the anæsthesia and the staining had materially lessened, and when I last saw the case everything pointed to a cure.

Since then I have employed these medicines extensively in some bad cases of erythema perstans, to which I consider anæsthetic leprosy closely allied, though classed with the tubercula, and have found them singularly beneficial; with the occasional exception too of a very strong solution of resorcin they are easily supported by the patient. I feel therefore quite warranted in recommending a trial in leprosy of the two last-named medicines, the ichthyol especially being a particularly safe drug; while the irritation set up by resorcin always creeps on slowly, is never in point of fact very severe, and is completely under control. Indeed, although the nitro-hydrochloric acid and solvent solution should only be administered under the superintendence of a medical man, there is no reason why the ichthyol and resorcin should not be employed by any skilful nurse. Having however frequently noticed the extreme susceptibility of the leper to the operation of very small doses of even the mildest medicines, I would suggest the greatest care at the outset, not more than a grain of ichthyol being given two or three times a day, while the resorcin lotion should not be used more than once daily, and then of not more than 10 p. c. strength. At the first sign of irritation, too, the latter should be given up, and ichthyol ointment,

one part of the paste to three of white vaseline, substituted for it. By and by the dose of ichthyol may be gradually raised to ten grains two or three times a day, and the use of the resorcin solution resumed, after which the strength of the latter can be doubled.

The system of Dr. Unna, carried out in its entirety, is after all simple enough, and presents no insurmountable difficulties. It is not very expensive, and will most likely become less so as increased facilities for the production of some of the ingredients present themselves; these can be procured from any druggist. It needs no elaborate machinery and does not require to be supplemented by a costly diet. It can be employed in conjunction with the medicines I have mentioned as being used by myself, and from which alone I have seen any benefit in leprosy; of course not including ichthyol and resorcin. It would not interfere with but rather ally itself to the nerve stretching practised by surgeon Laurie, and the galvanism of neuromata of the ulnar nerve carried out by Seguin; both of which seem to have been successful. In short it offers a fair chance of affording some relief to those who have been outcasts ever since history began; and as there is not the least probability that either the India Office or the Legislative Council of India will take the subject up, I can only suggest that some of those ladies and gentlemen, who have so nobly interested themselves in the fate of the leper, might arrange to have at least the simplest and safest parts of the treatment put in force in some one of the many haunts of leprosy, where they or their friends may have the opportunity of so doing. With the view of promoting this object Messrs. Williams and Elvey, Halkin Street West, have agreed to prepare in the most portable form possible the two strengths

of resorcin lotion, and the ichthyol both for outward and inward use, with full instructions for the employment of them.

One word as to a very important part of the subject—the diet of the leper. According to what I have observed it ought certainly to be light and moderately nutritious. Strong soups, jellies, rich food of every kind, stout, large quantities of beer, anything beyond a single small glass daily of such wines as port, sherry, marsala, tarragona, has in every instance within my experience done nothing but harm, bringing on an extreme amount of excitement of the system, feeling of heat and distress, with exacerbation of the subcutaneous pain and uneasy nervous symptoms under which the leper so often suffers ; for sluggish as his frame may appear, he is often peculiarly sensitive to disturbing influences of this nature, as also to much light, artificial heat, the effect of tonics, quinine especially, the operation of which he often supports very badly even in moderate quantities, while he bears calomel in purgative doses extremely well, sometimes reporting great relief, an anomaly also observed in other exhausting diseases, notably lupus and eczema.

I speak under correction, and am giving only the results of my own observations and those of other medical men whom I have questioned on the subject, when I say that, in all the host of communications which have of late appeared about leprosy, not a single reference is made to Unna's treatment, not a word said about it. If it be asked how this happens I can only say that I presume it is due partly to the fact that men have not time to master every subject brought under their notice, the mass of contributions to medical literature being so vast, that no

human brain could take up and properly digest down more than a moderate fraction of it. No doubt a good deal of this might very well be spared, and a system which would rid us of the superfluity, without the sacrifice of priceless improvements on the methods of bygone times, would be a boon to medicine; for if selection of what is really useful could be effected for us, and thus save us that waste of time which, in the present state of matters, is essential to research; if the process of oblivion, which is continually tending to bury all mortal works in one common grave, could be restricted to systems born only to perish at the first trial, or which carry their own refutation on the face of them, we should have at command a store of practical knowledge unencumbered by a mass of highly superfluous erudition. But it would be idle to hope for, to dream of any such process of preparatory sifting, and the inevitable, the fatal result of this impossibility is, that remedies and modes of treatment of sterling value are continually being lost sight of. Several years ago a physician of distinction called attention, in one of the leading medical journals, to the way in which valuable modes of procedure disappear without leaving a trace of their passage, pointing out that within eighteen months prior to the date of his communication four excellent kinds of treatment, which had been reported in that journal, had been passed over in utter silence; and some such fate has possibly enough already overtaken Unna's paper.

Partly also to the irrepressible tendency of even very able and honest observers to look upon their own discoveries, their own mode of treatment, with the fond eyes of an indulgent parent, blind to the weaknesses and faults of a spoiled child, who, instead of being properly toned

down, must be presented to an admiring public. When we call to mind that a famous medical author, not long passed away, tells us, in the evening of life, that he had outlived six or seven prevailing systems of treatment, all, we may be assured, taught, practised and often chivalrously and unselfishly defended by men speaking with authority ; that for a disease (lepra) supposed to be allied to leprosy, upwards of sixty remedies have been recommended as infallible or nearly so, every one of which proved on more extended trial inert or hurtful, it is impossible to refrain from doubting all systems not attested by unimpeachable authority. The instances just given are but a fragment of what could be adduced, and when men so often find the results of practice over-coloured, when they see one remedy after another sustaining in only a very slight degree its first reputation, they naturally come to be somewhat sceptical about what they read, unless the experience of some chance eye-witness first of all confirms it. They feel that they have no alternative ; they must have some security before they essay the novelty, which may land them in failure instead of conducting them to success. Under such circumstances it is not to be marvelled at if good methods sometimes disappear in company with the doubtful ones.

But I think there can be little doubt that the most potent, the most mischievous, factor here is the appearance on the scene of an element which points to a much more unsatisfactory state of matters, that is to say the perpetual intrusion of so many useless or even worse than useless systems of treatment ; crude, hasty productions, not only foredoomed to perish with their birth, but possessed of the power of hurrying to the grave along with them a great deal of what merits our most careful consideration. It is

of little use to tell us that the evil brings with it its own care ; it is not so. Brief as their career may be, these pestilent things are yet long-lived enough to do plenty of mischief. I am told on excellent authority, which, however, I do not consider myself at liberty to name, that so many perfectly useless modes of treating leprosy and cholera are laid before the government of India, that it has become absolutely necessary to decline taking any proposal of this nature into consideration.

In the report on this disease drawn up by the College of Physicians, the materials for which were collected by order of Government, we find cases related as cured in a month to six weeks. If the authors of the report considered that any credence was to be attached to these statements, then a special recommendation to make trial of such marvellously successful methods of treatment might very fittingly have accompanied a notice of them. It is to be borne in mind that the cure of leprosy in a month or six weeks can only be spoken of as a fact of the most astounding nature, much on a par with the cure of cancer or hydrophobia, and even affording material relief in such a limited space of time would be a feat to be proud of. I do not seek to arouse a breath of censure against the College ; quite the contrary. Most likely the gentlemen, entrusted with the task of framing the report, considered that it was their duty rather to arrange the facts laid before them than to sit in judgment on opinions and statements which they had no means of bringing to a practical test ; but unfortunately such a mode of dealing with the question is calculated to foster the belief that they did not think the treatment effecting such fortunate results worth trying.

The reader is doubtless aware that other methods of

treatment have been proposed, notably that of M. Beau-perthuy and the treatment with gurghun and chaoul-moogra oils, the story of which may very well be taken as exemplifying the vagueness of human opinion about the influence of medicines on leprosy ; for while, to judge from some statements, these things always relieve the disease when they don't cure it, my own trials and the information I have collected from medical men lead me to say distinctly that they never yet cured even the mildest case of leprosy and rarely relieved one ; relief, when they do afford it, being delusive and transitory. Along with this may be dismissed a host of remedies, more or less vaguely described as "useful," "productive of benefit," and so on. But though what we can learn about these modes of practice is at any rate calculated to kindle a ray of hope, another and a darker side of the question is revealed in the sad experience of so many able observers, who pronounce that leprosy is without any qualification—once for all incurable ; that all attempts to frustrate Nature's decree end only in defeat and vexation of spirit.

Compared, then, with the rather too brilliant reports of success recorded by one set of observers, the vague and suspiciously conflicting accounts given by others, and the hopeless tale told by the last, the history of Unna's case with its clear description of the effects of remedies, its precision with respect to dates and details, its completeness of outline, stands out in strong relief. And the success, such as it was, which he attained to was achieved by a method which I myself have over and over again condemned as delusive and irrational ; that is to say, basing any system, of treatment, not on the teaching of experience, not on induction from experiment, but on what has been called

the doctrine of rational medicine, being really and purely anticipation of effects from certain remedies, which anticipation turns out to be unfounded at least ninety-nine times out of a hundred, but which proved highly successful in the present instance.

While men like Adams, Daniellssen and Lang, who have seen so much of the disease, distinctly say that leprosy is not contagious, while all the most trustworthy evidence in the report points to the same conclusion, contagion is stated so positively to be the cause of its spreading in Guiana and some of the Pacific Islands, that, in the absence of more specific information, it would really seem as if the only conclusion to arrive at is that, possibly, in certain parts of the globe the disease all at once takes on a particular degree of malignity which renders it capable of conveying infection, much as in the Riviera it assumes, according to Lang and Köbner, a scaly form which the first of these able observers never saw in Norway. Most assuredly leprosy does not in its old haunts possess this quality, at any rate as the rule ; for, as Dr. Adams justly points out, had it been contagious in the ordinary sense of the term, it would long ago have exterminated the population of every place it had fastened on, an opinion shared I believe by every man who has seen much of the disease. It should never be lost sight of that contagion always gets the blame of a good deal more mischief than it is capable of effecting, and that, owing to the necessity for people mingling with one another, it is always easier to find evidence in its favour than against it.

Tradition and terror are really the chief foundations on which the belief in the contagiousness of leprosy rests. They have ever been, most likely ever will be, more

powerful than reason ; have ever found more willing listeners than dispassionate investigation, which indeed with only too many people has no chance against a popular creed. Not long ago the Health Commissioner of St. Louis produced a leper in the circuit court of that town, whereupon half the spectators, it is said, fled from the place in terror. Of all these people it is very doubtful if one could have given an intelligible reason for his taking part in this unseemly and unfounded panic. For unfounded it was, seeing that the unfortunate leper could no more have infected any of the audience, during his brief stay in court, than he could have transmitted leprosy to the inhabitants of some distant planet, the contagion, when it acts at all, operating very slowly.

Speaking at a dinner in aid of the National Leprosy Fund, the Prince of Wales said they were met for the purpose of raising means to relieve the misery of the leper. The idea is a kindly and a noble one, worthy of "humanity's best friend" ; though I have sometimes doubted whether the leper really suffers so much as people think, his senses, as well as I have been able to observe, becoming dulled in proportion as the disease encroaches on the frame. His Royal Highness then proceeded to deal with the question of segregation, faith in which I need hardly say presupposes unfaltering belief in contagion. He tells us that it appears to have checked the spreading of the disease in Norway, where the number of lepers has by this means been reduced to about one third of what it was before, and being now on the decline instead of increasing as it was before segregation had been put in force. I must however be permitted to remark that statistics of this kind, unless they are drawn

up by medical men provided with all necessary facilities for ascertaining exactly how matters stand, are often enough not over trustworthy, a great deal of disease being set down to the account of leprosy which has no connexion with it. But I propose to give the argument all the benefit of the doubt, and to admit that a great decline in the number of leprosy cases has really taken place under the influence of this measure, the feasibility of which as regards our own country and colonies must now be considered.

I suppose it will be admitted on all sides that the separation of lepers from the rest of the community, and the strictest possible interdiction of marriage, would be most desirable in their own interests ; but it will be something new in the history of leprosy to hear of any such measures being enforced ; for that segregation, often as it has been decreed, was ever yet thoroughly carried out, I beg most respectfully to doubt. In Great Britain the law seems to have been administered much as laws of this kind usually are, with spasmodic energy at the outset, and then allowed to fall into desuetude. The repetition, time after time, of the edicts fulminated against those who concealed the fact of some inmate of the house being affected with leprosy, shows that the law must have often enough been set at naught. At the present day any step of the kind in this country would merely mean going through an expensive farce. With magistrates and judges too weak to enforce it against any but the feeble, and only too often all but openly sympathizing with law breakers, deliberately setting statute and common sense alike at defiance in order to shield the criminal and gain popularity ; with paid officials year after year neglecting,

uncensured, the public duties for which they receive their salaries, we may rest assured that any enactment against the importation of the leper into this country, or his freedom of movement when here, would soon be evaded, just as those against smoke, vaccination, adulteration, &c., are broken every day in sight of the very authorities who ought to see them enforced.

Segregation means incurring the cost, not only of building asylums and feeding and clothing our lepers, but of maintaining a perfect host of medical attendants, nurses, laundresses, gatekeepers and other servants, nearly all of whom would demand higher pay than usual for waiting on such patients, and of whom a disproportionate number would be required, owing to the inability of the leper to do anything for himself in the advanced stages of the disease. Taking all these items into account, the expense of housing each leper would most likely amount to quite ten pounds, and his yearly maintenance, even in India where food is so cheap, to quite as much if not far more; and as there are probably at least a quarter of a million lepers in our colonies, the number in India alone being computed at fully two hundred thousand, the reader will see that the sum required for such a measure would be something frightful. His Royal Highness said the Viceroy of India was not prepared to recommend the outlay which would be required for asylums fit to hold all the lepers in Bengal. I should think not indeed, and moreover I should say that no future Viceroy either would recommend such a step. The lepers in the presidency number fifty-three thousand, and on a moderate computation would need seven thousand people to attend on them, keep them in order, and save

them from starving ; so that unless they were very close packed, a barrack more than five times as big as Hyde Park would be needed to hold them all.

If then the treatment adopted by Unna should prove as successful in the hands of others as it did in his own, the employment of it may relieve an enormous amount of misery and save us an enormous amount of expense. Sir Somers Vine tells us that the leprosy fund now amounts to about seven thousand pounds ; but twice seven hundred thousand would barely meet the cost of effectual segregation throughout the dependencies of England. As to the stamping out of leprosy, so encouragingly spoken of by Mr. Hutchinson and Sir Andrew Clark, it may suffice to say that, until the skill of man avails to check the effects of soil and climate, the genesis of leprosy is not likely to die out in most of the lands infested by this disease, seeing that cases enough spring up afresh every year in these places, which cannot in common reason be ascribed to contagion.

12, SUFFOLK STREET,

PALL MALL.

1890.



