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CONSTIPATION IN THE INSANE.

BY

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Medical Superintendent, Westbrooke House, Alton, Hants.

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South-Western Division, October, 1896.*

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CONSTIPATION IN THE INSANE.

By J. F. BRISCOE.

Medical Superintendent, Westbrooke House, Alton, Hants.

We understand by the term constipation, scanty evacuation of fæces, with absence of mechanical impediment to defæcation. If there be mechanical impediment there is retention of the fæces. The two conditions are very different. The number of the motions depend normally on the varying proportions of the saliva and the juices of the chylopoietic-viscera which are mixed with the residue of the alimentary matters. Voluntary opposition to defæcation causes the fæces to accumulate in the rectum, paralysing and injuring its contractility; and, as there is sympathy in action between all parts of the tube, the peristaltic waves are arrested in the upper part of the intestines, and thus the constipation is increased and auto-intoxication set up to the detriment of the whole economy. It is obvious that constipation is only a link in the series of causes and sequences arising from the disturbed abdominal viscera, and that it encourages and accentuates such symptoms as mental apathy, irritability, perverted moral feelings, melancholia, mania, suicide; nay, more, produces very marked emaciation and cachexia, resembling malignant disease. Further, that these affections, with chorea, hysteria, hypochondriasis, epilepsy, dementia, etc., if not cured are certainly considerably relieved by a dose of Epsom salts, a purgative worthy of being styled "The Emperor of Drugs."

The animal economy is the theatre of toxic evolution and elimination—phenomena which are brought about by putrefactive processes, and which are always normally present in the fæcal contents of the bowels. Fæcal putrid products defectively eliminated in the course of health, as in disease, may be absorbed and induce intoxication and poisoning, deadening and altering the functional activity of the ultimate constituents of our nervous systems, and resulting in mental aberration. The first point then

to be noted is, that every person who voluntarily constipates his bowels exposes himself to the risk of being morbidly constipated; and he, on the other hand, who regularly obeys the call of Nature thereby prevents the accident of constipation.

It is the business of the psychologist to study not only the influence of the mind on the body, but also that of the body on the mind, and in so doing he has the opportunity of learning to trace moral effects to physical causes. So much stress is laid on the paramount importance of moral management that active remedial measures are almost omitted, and nature is left in a great measure unassisted by the powers of medicine. The very physicians who admit the influence of morbid bodily actions in producing insanity yet disregard those agents which are likely to remove them, and they do not appear to draw sufficient attention to the functions of the digestive organs and the chemical reactions which their importance in the mental balance seem to indicate. It has been justly remarked "that the greatest number of cases of insanity, produced by sympathetic causes, originate from deranged functions of the digestive tract." That constipation plays an important part in producing insanity cannot be denied. Who has not seen a prodigious evacuation of the bowels terminate a case of mental disease? The physicians of a former age laid great stress on the congestive states of the abdominal viscera, and were most heroic with their bleedings and purgations. As in everything else, "fashion changes," and now-a-days the student of medicine rarely performs the operation of venesection, yet a bleeding judiciously and wisely resorted to does undoubtedly in some forms of disease terminate a case beneficially. From humoralism we have passed to solidism, from solidism we return again to humoralism, and the microbe is the only connecting link. Investigation is now in the direction of the animal alkaloids and their effects. If the animal economy is not purely a chemical apparatus, it is far less a fermenting vat. Thus we see the school of the past and the school of the present will be found mutually to support each other.

The causes of constipation may be either nervous or mechanical. Amongst the former may be enumerated apoplexy and other conditions of the brain and nervous system which appear to paralyse the muscular element of the intestinal tube. The mechanical are more likely to occasion permanent obstruction and death, and may be either within or without the canal.

The sphincter ani offers resistance according to circumstances and conditions of the nervous system. Among local affections

which cause costiveness are hæmorrhoids and fissures. Piles are sometimes, and anal fissures are always painful, and encourage constipation through the spasm which defæcation excites in the subjects of these affections. Displacements of the uterus, exudation into the pelvic cavity, fibroids, etc., bring about the same result. In old age and in women who have had many children, the abdominal muscles of expiration become enfeebled, and the power of voluntary expulsion becomes correspondingly depreciated. Again, fæcal collections frequently occasion diarrhœa and ulceration, leading to enteritis and death. It is well to remember too, that great eaters regularly evacuate their motions; small eaters are generally constipated. Animal food is more constipating than fresh vegetables and fruits. Thus some women are only constipated in winter when deprived of fruits. M. Trousseau mentions the case of a young woman who was "horribly constipated"; and he accidentally discovered that it was so because of the filthy condition of the closet, and when a more elegant cabinet was provided the change entirely cured the constipation. It is evident, at all events, that two conditions are indispensable in the treatment, viz.: great firmness on the part of the physician, and extreme docility on the part of the patient. With the insane this is frequently as difficult a task as feeding, and the fact remains that the accident to constipation is added by irregularity in going to "closet." The principle, then, on which we have to build a system of cerebral pathology is that mental health is dependent upon the due nutrition, stimulation, and repose of the brain, *i.e.*, upon the conditions of exhaustion and reparation of its nerve substance being maintained in a healthy and regular state, and that mental disease results from the interruption or disturbance of these conditions. When man is insane it is not by a single part that he goes wrong; all his existence is more or less interested, and we shall find that the future pathology of nervous diseases will form part and parcel of a new physico-chemical theory of life. Since so much attention is paid to the food we give to our patients, why, then, do we not study the chemical reactions of the fæcal excreta? As chemistry is considered the most important collateral science, it is a fitting opportunity to allude to this now we are discussing constipation and its consequences, for micro-organisms and the animal alkaloids are a study of great significance. It would be theoretically most interesting to examine the fæces in some such way as the urine, but the subject is full of enormous difficulties. I am perhaps anticipating by a decade what can be done in that

direction. However, more frequent microscopical and bacteriological examinations of the fæces might lead up to a system of chemical analysis, the importance of which, in the study of mental disease, we are at present unable to calculate. The attendant is too often held responsible for the frequency and nature of the motions when we ourselves ought to be the scrutineers.

The day has now arrived when it is no longer sufficient to say that a person has this or that form of dyspepsia. You ought to be able to say, and prove by chemical analysis, what is the particular form of defect in the chemical process of digestion, or what special chemical fermentation or change is going on within the alimentary canal. We attach little importance to the morphology of the microbe ; on the contrary, it is the chemistry of the products of that microbe's existence to which our attention is attracted. From those working in the field of animal alkaloids, the ptomaines and leucomaines, it appears that a revolution will eventually occur in a rational improvement in therapeutics, and that the whole theory of medicine is likely to change. In discussing the subject of the leucomaines, interest at once increases as we approach the excremental products. The study of the urinary and intestinal excreta shows new and yet more complex aspects of the chemical problem, for the elaboration of these alkaloids is not dependent solely on the presence of microorganisms. Under conditions of imperfect oxidation and physiological combustion, the natural emunctories, the kidneys and the intestinal canal, throw off by elimination the risks of disturbance to the organism by the poisonous elements of its production. In conclusion, Dr. Van Gieson, of America, says :—" There may be a long lapse of time between the occurrence of the general body disease and the appearance of the mental or nervous symptoms due to the damage wrought on the brain by the toxic substances associated with the acute general illness. The lapse of time may be so long that the relation between the two events is lost track of."