

**A report on arsenical poisoning by means of wall-papers, paints, etc. :
presented to the Medical Society of London on the part of a committee of
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A REPORT ON ARSENICAL POISONING BY MEANS OF WALL-PAPERS, PAINTS, ETC.

*Presented to the Medical Society of London on the part of a
Committee of the Society.*

By MALCOLM A. MORRIS, M.R.C.S.Eng.,
Secretary to the Committee.

IN submitting the following report, your Committee have to express their regret that the appeal for professional information on the subject of arsenical poisoning by means of wall-papers, paint, articles of furniture, etc., has not met with more general response. This is doubtless mainly attributable to the fact that the attention of medical men has only recently been directed to the subject, in which case the publicity that has been given to this inquiry will have the effect of ensuring more minute observation of these cases in the future.

The report will be found to be based upon replies to the number of two hundred and twenty-four, which have been received as the result of the issue of fifteen hundred circulars addressed to the Fellows of the Society and other members of the profession. The circular took the form of the following questions : 1. Have you had under your observation, during the last five years, any cases clearly traceable to arsenical poisoning, produced by wall-papers, paint, articles of furniture, or wearing apparel, etc.? 2. Any cases previous to that time? 3. What were the first symptoms that led you to suspect this form of poisoning? 4. State briefly the prominent characteristics of each case? 5. Were there any external symptoms of irritation? 6. How long was it in each case before the patient recovered health and strength? 7. Were any cases fatal? 8. What article contained the poison? What tests were employed to detect its presence? 9. How many cases occurred in men? How many in women? How many in children?

In their replies to these questions, only fifty-four of the two hundred and twenty-four correspondents were able to afford particulars of cases of poisoning by this agent that had come under their personal observation, but their remarks have reference to more than one hundred cases.

A most important feature in this testimony, is that no fewer than twenty-four instances of the poisoning occurred in the persons of the medical men themselves, or in members of their families, which, in the first place, is very strong evidence of the difficulties attending the diagnosis of this form of poisoning, and, secondly, tends to show that the better opportunities for observation afforded to a medical man in his own house may lead to the detection of mischief which, from its insidious nature, baffles ordinary tests, or, by assuming symptoms of a general character, is often erroneously treated as indicating a different class of ailments.

The following cases have occurred in the houses of medical men.

CASE I.—“For more than a year”, writes a practitioner of eminence, “my own wife suffered repeated attacks (one of great severity) of enteritis. The patient was in the habit of sitting the greater part of the day in a room papered with green paper. Without any reference to the symptoms, the paper was accidentally changed to another colour. It was noticed by me afterwards that the symptoms had disappeared. It then occurred to me that it might be due to the green pigment; and, on testing a piece of the old paper, I found abundance of arsenic.”

CASE II.—A physician and his wife suffered from conjunctivitis and from nausea after food. On the arrival of a relative, who soon was attacked in a similar manner, the cause was traced to the drawing-room paper, which contained arsenic.

CASE III.—A distinguished consulting surgeon lost two children from enteritis. The cause of the illness was a mystery until after their death, when the nursery-paper, the pattern of which was a fuchsia, leaves and blossom on a brown ground, was found to contain arsenic.

CASE IV.—A medical man and wife suffered from headaches, nausea, and conjunctivitis, all of which were worse early in the morning. The symptoms abated when the bedroom paper was removed. It contained arsenic.

CASE V.—A surgeon suffered severely for several days from extreme depression, diarrhoea, griping, and asthma at night; and, his wife some

days afterwards being affected with similar symptoms, the paint of the sitting-room was suspected by the physician in attendance. It was found to contain a large quantity of arsenic.

CASE VI.—A consulting physician had a severe attack of enteritis, with hæmorrhage and great prostration. All the symptoms disappeared on the removal of the paper of his study. It contained a large amount of arsenic.

CASE VII.—A physician, in reporting his own case, says he had “intense cephalalgia, conjunctivitis with intolerance of light, great depression, loss of appetite with gastric irritation—worse when using the study, the wall-paper of which contained arsenic.”

CASE VIII.—A physician says he suffered from griping, constipation, and headache for more than two years. He noticed that the symptoms were worse on entering the dining-room in the morning after it had been closed during the night. “I soon recovered on the removal of the cause.” The dining-room paper contained arsenic.

CASE IX.—A consulting physician and his wife both suffered from restlessness, loss of sleep, malaise, and headache. The symptoms lasted a fortnight, but disappeared when the bedroom paper was removed. This was proved to contain arsenic.

CASE X.—A surgeon says that his wife, child, and himself had irritable cough, accompanied by wakefulness, restlessness during sleep, and irritation of the eyelids. All the symptoms disappeared in a week or ten days after the removal of the bedroom paper, which contained arsenic.

In the remainder of the cases reported, diarrhœa, nausea, and intestinal mischief occurred in thirty-five; severe depression in sixteen; conjunctivitis in nineteen; and cough, asthma, etc., in nine. Several instances of external irritation are mentioned, such as eczema from stockings and gloves, conjunctivitis from tulle dresses, eczema of the head from artificial flowers, etc.

It should be remarked that the foregoing statements have not emanated, by any means, exclusively from men having preconceived notions of the value of careful investigation in such circumstances. The conclusions arrived at by them have been forced upon them by stern necessity as the only solution of the enigma, and in many cases in direct opposition to their own *à priori* judgment and previous opinions. They are men, many of them standing high in the profession, whose opinions should carry weight with their colleagues; and it follows that if only after much careful watching and by a process of

exhaustion or exclusion they were able to determine the real sources of the evil, there must be a vast amount of information yet to be obtained when time and a better knowledge of this subtle poison and its workings shall have brought the profession to unite their efforts to sift and study the matter. As an illustration of the difficulty of tracing the symptoms to their actual source, no stronger fact could be adduced than so large a percentage of patients were in the houses of the medical men themselves, and so directly and constantly under their scrutiny; and this seems to indicate that exceptional facilities are necessary to the discovery of the evil. Not only must the symptoms be watched and tested, but every article that suggests an explanation must be suspected. The occurrence and recurrence of the mischief under certain conditions will often lead to its detection. But as all these precautions involve much labour and assiduous attention, it is too much to expect them to be employed except by such who possess both the knowledge and the determination necessary to support them in their search, and an earnest desire to cope with a somewhat impalpable antagonist.

As to the articles referred to, thirty-six medical men report that they have observed cases of poisoning clearly due to arsenic in paper, five in paint; while several others have traced its presence in stockings, wearing apparel, artificial flowers, bedsteads, and toys.

Your Committee have come to the conclusion that the time has arrived when some check should be imposed upon the free and unrestricted sale of poisoned articles before mentioned, with a view to making it compulsory that such articles should be advertised as containing deleterious matter, in order that purchasers might at least be aware of the danger they were incurring in their use.

But before taking any steps with regard to legislation in the matter, your Committee are of opinion that some further effort might be made to obtain some more general expression of opinion from the profession, who, it may be, will, after reading this report, make more careful and fuller notes of any appearances of poisoning from arsenical compounds, and thus place at your Committee's disposal, at some not very distant period, a crushing and incontestable weight of evidence which could with confidence be brought under the notice of Parliament.
