

A GUIDE TO MEDICAL AND SURGICAL NURSING.*

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DIGESTIVE ORGANS (CONTINUED).

I HOPE that you may never be called upon to nurse that most awful of diseases, *Asiatic or malignant cholera*; and I only mention it to tell you that it is a very different thing from the English cholera, which often visits us, more especially in the autumn.

You are all probably acquainted with the malady called *diarrhoea*, by which is usually meant frequent, loose, or liquid evacuations of the bowels. Diarrhoea constantly accompanies other diseases, and is at other times often an effort of nature to get rid of some irritating and offending substance in the intestines. After the irritant has been got rid of, the purging generally ceases, though you will meet with cases under treatment in the wards where it has become *chronic*.

The ordinary proceeding is not to stop diarrhoea, but to favour the recovery by diluent drinks, &c.; and it is often hastened by first sweeping out the intestinal canal with a purgative, and then soothing it by an opiate.

English cholera is diarrhoea and something more. The attack is generally sudden, and consists of an enormous discharge from the bowels, and also of vomiting of a bilious, acrid fluid. There is a burning sensation in the abdomen, and spasms occur, after which the patient grows cold and faint. Death sometimes occurs.

In this complaint opium is most constantly administered, and there is very much in the power of a good Nurse, as regards the external remedies which may be ordered. Mustard poultices, hot salt applied in a bag, and hot flannel sprinkled with oil of turpentine, will be laid on the abdomen; and the cramps in the extremities, which generally torment the sufferer, may be allayed by constant friction.

When the state of collapse is very great, the patient should not be allowed to raise himself, as fatal faintness may follow.

I need hardly tell you how much a patient depends, in such a case, on a Nurse. She must be most scrupulous as regards cleanliness—not a very easy matter very frequently—no discharge from the patient should be suffered to remain an instant in the room, and all sheets, &c., soiled by it should be subjected to a purifying process apart from other linen.

The great difference between this and the

terrible malignant cholera is that the evacuations in the latter case contain no bile, but consist of a whitish fluid resembling the water in which rice has been boiled. An awful state of collapse comes on very early in the disease; death is known to take place in two or three hours, and is seldom, in fatal cases, delayed longer than fifteen. A great proportion of cases terminate fatally.

I must not forget to remind you of the constant movement which takes place in the intestinal canal. This is called the *peristaltic contraction* of the intestine, and is a worm-like movement which propels the contents of the canal onwards.

A fluid called the *intestinal juice* is also secreted by the bowels, which assists in the assimilation of food.

The *intestinal canal* is sometimes infested by worms. There are five kinds, which you will be likely to see specimens of in your Nursing experience. I will give you simply the common names for them.

The *round worm*, the *thread worm*, the *long thread worm*, and two kinds of *tape worms*.

The presence of worms, which depends greatly on the patient's general health, is accompanied by intolerable itching in the neighbourhood of the rectum, griping pains in the abdomen, and a prevailing feeling of discomfort, and their discovery by the Nurse occasionally explains symptoms which have been attributed to other complaints.

Having now concluded all that my limited space permits me to say about the intestinal canal, I must ask you to go a few steps backwards with me to where the canal joins on to the pyloric end of the stomach. This, the small end of the canal, is called the *duodenum*. Two important glands open close to one another into the duodenum. These are called the *liver* and the *pancreas* or *sweetbread*.

The liver is the largest gland in the body, and performs a double office, for it separates from the blood, which is supplied to it in large quantities, certain deleterious ingredients, and also forms an important agent in the digestion of food. The liver is a manufactory for *bile*, which it supplies through a duct into the duodenum. As this manufacture of bile is always going on, a reservoir is provided for the surplus quantity. This is called the *gall bladder*, and has a duct meeting that from the liver, and opening into the small intestine.

The pancreas or sweatbread is concerned in the digestive economy, and is placed beneath the liver and stomach. It secretes a fluid somewhat resembling saliva, and one of its functions appears to be to convert the starch which is found in many articles of food into sugar, and so render it soluble. It also makes fat soluble, by turning it

* These articles are partially from the pen of the late Miss Alice Fisher and Mrs. Norris, and will eventually be published in book form, being revised by the latter.

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