

Lectures on Elementary Physiology in relation to Medical Nursing.

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LECTURE IV.—THE EXCRETORY ORGANS.

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WHEN a patient is having a vapour bath, therefore, the Nurse should not leave the bedside, and should watch its effect most carefully. Sometimes the patient's skin does not perspire for some time and then the pressure upon the heart, which is considerably increased, may cause serious symptoms, and its action may first of all become irregular, and then appear to fail altogether. Sometimes also, drugs, such as Pilocarpin, are given hypodermically, which, while exciting the skin to increased action, tend to depress the patient very greatly; and so once more the Nurse has to carefully watch for signs of syncope. She should, therefore, in such cases, always ask for special directions, both as to the quantity and kind of stimulants to be given to the patient, and also as to whether the vapour bath shall be continued, if any signs of faintness show themselves.

Presuming, however, that the effects of medicines, outward applications, baths, and so forth, fail to re-establish the activity of the kidneys, the patient may suffer from symptoms due to the suppression of Urine, and the non-elimination of the poisonous product Urea from the system. In this case, certain symptoms occur which are most characteristic, and which direct the attention of the doctor to approaching dangers. The onset of Uræmia, as this form of blood-poisoning is called, is usually preceded by severe headaches, which are described, first of all, as a feeling of weight or tightness around the forehead, and then as a heavy aching pain at the back of the head. Then the patient usually complains of dimness of sight or of some confusion of memory. He will, for example, say that he cannot read the newspaper; that all the letters are blurred and run together. Or he will, while appearing to be quite rational in other respects, forget facts which have just occurred, and ask the same question again and again, evidently forgetting that he has already received an answer to it. Such signs, slight though they may seem in themselves, are of great importance in patients suffering from kidney disease, and

in whom the proper quantity of Urea is not being excreted; and these symptoms should therefore be immediately reported to the doctor. If the diminution in Urine in these cases continues, as a rule the patient next suffers from some form of fit, which may either be like an ordinary attack of apoplexy or may seem to resemble an epileptic seizure—that is to say, to be of a violent convulsive character. Sometimes, the patient recovers consciousness speedily after the fit; at other times, he may be unconscious for some length of time, and may either seem to be in his ordinary state of health when he recovers consciousness, or it may be found that he has lost power over one or more limbs, and be, to that extent, paralysed. Sometimes, however, Nature makes an attempt to relieve the patient of the poison circulating in his system, by means of a severe attack of diarrhoea and vomiting. Or, for the same reason, there may be considerable effusion of fluid from the blood vessels into the cavities of the pleuræ, or into the pericardium; and in either case the patient will suffer from extreme difficulty of breathing, and violent palpitation of the heart; or perhaps sudden death may occur in consequence of the pressure of the fluid upon the organ. More commonly, the convulsive attacks are followed by an increasing amount of drowsiness, and it becomes more and more difficult to arouse the patient from the stupor into which he sinks. Then this condition deepens into coma, and finally the breathing becomes more and more shallow and infrequent, and so the patient dies. Then again, the œdema or dropsy of the legs and thighs, which is so common a symptom of kidney disease, is only an outward manifestation of the same condition in the internal organs, and the lung tissue may become so distended with fluid, that the organs cannot perform their proper function, and so the patient will die from asphyxia. During all forms of renal disease, however, every other organ and part of the body suffers in consequence of the failure of the kidneys to remove from the system the excess of fluid, and the poisonous Urea. So, in addition to the brain disturbance which has been described, there is also a special form of disease of the retina of the eye, which is well recognized from its association with kidney disease; and, as we have seen, both the heart and the lungs may be dangerously affected in consequence of the inability of the kidneys to perform their functions.

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