

Lectures on Elementary Physiology, in relation to Medical Nursing.

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LECTURE V.—THE NERVOUS SYSTEM.

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HERE is a form of Delirium which is more commonly met with in hospital patients, and which differs from others in rarely, if ever, being accompanied by a rise of temperature. This is known as Delirium Tremens, in consequence of the extreme violence usually exhibited by the patient. It is the result of gradual poisoning by alcohol, and is especially interesting, inasmuch as it may occur either after, and in consequence of, an excessive drinking bout, or as a consequence of the deprivation of spirits to a person who has been accustomed to indulge in alcohol to excess. In the great majority of cases, after a prolonged debauch, the patient becomes intensely nervous and irritable, and suffers from various delusions, the most common of which is the belief that mice, rats, or some form of reptiles, are in large numbers creeping about his bed or on the walls of his room. It is comparatively rare that the delusions affect the sense of hearing, though occasionally such patients state that they hear voices threatening them with various injuries.

After a short interval, the patient becomes more or less unconscious of his surroundings, and attempts to injure himself, or those around him; and unless restrained may really cause great harm. Patients have even been known during this state to cut their own throats, or dangerously injure their neighbours. The first thing, therefore, to be done is to remove from such persons any sharp or pointed instruments, or heavy weapons with which they may do harm; and to maintain the same precaution until they are entirely convalescent. Next, the doctor will probably give directions, especially in private practice, that the patient shall be kept in bed, and so be kept harmless. The ordinary plan of tucking in the bed-clothes tightly, and then tying a sheet over the body and under the bed, is rarely of much use with such patients; and in the case of men, male attendants are almost essential, for it is quite impossible to reason with them, or, indeed, to do anything except restrain them by main force.

The curious point, however, which has just been noticed, requires to be clearly

remembered by nurses. A patient, for example, who has been in the habit of taking considerable quantities of spirits for some months, may receive some even slight injury which will confine him to bed, and which will cause a doctor unacquainted with his habits to prescribe, as a routine measure, abstinence from alcohol. Then, in many cases, whether it be from the sudden deprivation of the stimulant to which he has become habituated, as some medical men think; or whether it be that the nervous shock of the accident exercises an irritating effect upon the tissues of the brain which excesses have already rendered more prone to disease; it is at any rate certain that these cases of delirium tremens are more severe and more dangerous than those which occur in the manner already described. They usually exhibit what is known as a "low type" of delirium; that is to say, instead of the violent excitement characteristic of an ordinary attack, the patient, after seeing visions of reptiles and so forth, usually falls into an almost unconscious condition, during which he mutters and talks in a whisper, and almost incoherently, with only occasional intervals of excitement. His tongue becomes furred, then perfectly dry and brown. His fingers clutch at the bed-clothes, and seem to be making efforts to take hold of things visible only to himself. His eyes are deeply bloodshot and the skin is usually dry, and at the same time often colder than normal. The same condition is characteristic of persons suffering from other forms of blood-poisoning, and undoubtedly denotes a complete prostration of the nervous system.

These two varieties, then, of Delirium Tremens are typical of the two forms which any form of delirium may take, and are characteristic, the one of the acute form which is probably due to active congestion of the nerve centres or of extreme irritation of the brain; while the other type denotes a complete exhaustion of nerve power, due in most instances to the benumbing effect of some poison circulating in the blood. It is therefore needless to point out that while the former requires the nurse to restrain the patient, the latter demands the most careful administration of the nourishments and stimulants prescribed by the medical man, in order to maintain the patient's strength. In brief, then, the one form is associated with considerable strength; the other with most dangerous weakness.

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