

The Nursing of Heart Diseases.

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CHAPTER III.

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It is not only necessary that the patient should be kept in bed but also that he should be kept at absolute rest, both of mind and body. It will be remembered from the description given in a previous lecture that the first consequence of this disease is the production of beads, and in some cases of outgrowths, of lymph along the edges of the valves. When the mind is disturbed, everyone knows that the heart begins to beat more quickly, and the rush of blood, in such a case, over the inflamed surface would be increased. On the other hand, any bodily exertion causes an extra strain to be thrown upon the blood vessels, and therefore upon the heart. And, in either case, the result of the extra strain may be, and often is, to cause the detachment from the valves of some smaller or larger fragment of the inflammatory outgrowth, with the grave results which have already been described at some length. Or, in the case of a severe strain, it sometimes happens that the pressure of the blood upon the weakened, softened, valve causes this to tear through, generally with rapidly fatal results.

It is, therefore, all-important that, during the acute stage of endocarditis, at any rate, the patient should be kept perfectly quiet; all disturbing news should be kept from him, and he should not be allowed to make any movement for himself.

For the same reason, many practitioners direct that the patient's head should be kept as low as possible; because, of course, by this means, the work of the heart is rendered as easy as possible. But, as a practical fact, many patients cannot rest or sleep with the head low, and therefore this has to be somewhat raised. If the patient is to be kept quiet, it is most important that he should be comfortable; and therefore the position of his pillows becomes of much importance. As a general rule, too little attention is paid to supporting the neck and the back; and the patient will often complain of intolerable pain in one or the other situation, after a few hours in bed, which can generally be prevented or removed

by so placing the pillows as to give firm and even support to the shoulders, neck, and head.

Especially is this the case with the lumbar region, and a small air pillow placed under the back, will often make a patient comfortable, and therefore keep him quiet in the recumbent position, who had previously suffered the greatest discomfort and unrest from the neglect of this simple measure.

From the inevitable want of exercise, there are, however, two common results; coldness of the feet, and constipation. The former may prevent sleep, and thus cause the patient considerable harm by weakening his nervous system, and it is a curious practical fact how often this cause is overlooked, and how frequently a patient who has passed one sleepless night after another will fall into soft and refreshing slumber, soon after a hot water-bottle has been placed to his feet.

With regard to constipation, the best method of treatment, because the most rational—seeing that the cause is want of muscular exercise—is gentle massage of the abdomen. About a tablespoonful of olive oil should be gently rubbed into the skin of the abdomen, the movements following the course of the colon—in other words, following the hands of a clock—and being continued for about a quarter of an hour at a time, night and morning. This measure and the use of Glycerine suppositories often obviates the need for aperients, which, in these cases, sometimes weaken the patient considerably; and which, therefore, the doctor is generally anxious to avoid if possible.

Sufficient has probably been said, however, to show, on the one hand, that constipation must be prevented, and, on the other, that no straining must be permitted. It is generally impossible to employ such useful remedies as the various preparations of castor oil because of their tendency to cause vomiting, and therefore an undue strain on the patient's heart; but there are some cases when other indications make it necessary that this drug should be employed. Then, much advantage is obtained by the use of the modern preparations, such as the Tasteless Castor Oil of Messrs. Allen and Hanbury's or the Laxol prepared by Messrs. A. & J. White, because most patients can take these preparations well in consequence of the nauseous odour and taste of the ordinary oil being so well disguised.

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