

## The Nursing of Heart Diseases.

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### CHAPTER III.

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In the treatment of endocarditis, as of all other cases of heart disease, the question of stimulants is often very difficult. On the one hand, it may be imperatively required when there is a threatened failure of the heart's action; and, on the other, its continued use is rarely ordered at the present day, not only because it tends to excite and quicken the action of the organ, but also because, if the system becomes habituated to the alcohol, it may fail in its usefulness just when it is most required. In fact, it may be said that alcohol, in cases of heart disease, is an excellent spur, but a very untrustworthy whip. So as a general rule, stimulants are not ordered in acute attacks such as those which we are now considering. When, however, it is prescribed, the nurse should obtain from the doctor definite instructions as to its methods of administration, and must as rigorously as possible carry out these instructions.

As a general rule, malt liquors do more harm than good, in cases of heart disease, because in the majority of these patients there is more or less tendency to congestion of the liver and intestines, a condition which is increased by the use of beer and stout, especially when no active exercise can be taken. With regard to wines, again, the tendency to indigestion exhibited by most of these patients debar the use of the more acid wines, so that it is necessary, in choosing a wine, to select one which is as "dry" and free from sugar as possible. There is a natural champagne wine made in Epernay which is but little known or consumed in this country, which answers admirably in many of these cases. It is not medicated to suit the English taste, is not effervescent, and contains a very small quantity of sugar. Some of the Australian wines, notably the lighter white varieties, are also useful in these cases, and the Government brands possess the great and unique advantage of being absolutely pure.

When brandy or whisky is ordered, the particular taste of the patient may be consulted, but it is necessary to choose an old spirit rather than accept any recent vintage which the wine-merchant may offer. The reason for this

caution is very simple; patients with heart disease are, as a rule, very susceptible to any irritant of the stomach, and a new and more or less fiery spirit is very apt to cause so much gastric irritability that acute indigestion may be caused and the patient's appetite and nutrition may seriously suffer. It is, of course, impossible to lay down any general rule, when every patient differs so greatly from every other, but it is always well to give alcohol in these cases experimentally; that is to say, to ascertain the effect upon the patient of a small dose of alcohol before giving a larger one. Sometimes, so much palpitation is caused, such violent flushings of the face, and such vascular excitement generally, that his condition may be rendered materially worse, and then it is needless to say the nurse must not administer any further dose of the stimulant until she has reported these effects to the doctor and obtained his instructions. When the heart is very weak, there is another reason for exercising caution in this matter. Alcohol is not only a stimulant, but, by the reaction which it brings about, is, to some extent, a depressant also. Its effects, therefore, must always be most carefully watched. The force of the pulse, of course, especially when taken by the sphygmograph, affords the best indication of the varying strength of the heart. But this is a matter which few nurses possess the experience to estimate correctly. The rate of its beat can, however, be generally obtained with complete accuracy by counting it carefully for a whole minute. It is, by the way, often most deceptive to count it for ten or fifteen seconds and imagine that this affords a fair estimate of the rate. The mere fact that his pulse is being counted, is often sufficient in some patients, whether suffering from heart disease or not, but especially in the former case, to quicken the beats by 20 or 30 in the minute. It is essential, therefore, for the nurse always to count the pulse, for the purpose of charting it, whilst the patient is in the same position, that is to say, either lying down or sitting up, and to hold the wrist for a minute or so, before actually beginning to count, so as to permit any nervous quickening at first to subside. Only by attention to these precautions can a fair comparison be made between the rate of the pulse on different days, and at different times of the day, and after food, medicine, or stimulants have been administered.

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