

The Nursing of Heart Diseases.

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CHAPTER IV.

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Next in importance to the patient's position, comes the question of his dieting; and perhaps sufficient has already been said in previous Lectures for the reader to understand that the first essential in the diet of these patients must be the restriction of fluids to as small an amount as possible.

Still the matter is so important that it cannot be too frequently emphasized. The dropsical fluid in the tissues implies that the blood-vessels have contained more blood than the heart was able to pump easily through the course of the circulation. Therefore, the common sense reasoning is obvious; that the more fluid the patient is given in his diet—that is to say the more water his blood-vessels can suck up from his intestines, the more loaded will his circulation become, and therefore the greater will be the tendency for the dropsical condition to increase.

On the other hand, remembering this same power of suction and that the blood must possess a certain amount of fluid in order to be able to circulate at all, the same reasoning leads to the conclusion that the less fluid the patient is given in his diet the less water can his blood obtain from the intestines, and therefore the more will the bloodvessels be compelled to absorb from the dropsical effusion in the tissues—in other words, the more rapidly will the dropsy diminish and disappear.

These facts, then, are emphasized again, because from want of knowledge, and therefore from want of appreciation of their cardinal importance, many nurses have yielded to a patient's complaint of thirst, and whilst relieving his immediate discomfort have, by allowing him more fluid, actually increased his real danger. In previous Lectures, hints have been given as to the best methods of alleviating the thirst experienced by patients thus deprived of their ordinary amount of fluids; but, in these cases, and especially when the dropsy is extreme, it is remarkable how little the patient suffers as a rule from the sensation of thirst. The tissues of the body are, so to speak, more or less soddened and water-logged; and, just like a piece of land which is badly drained, the whole body

is surfeited with fluid. And it is worth remembering that the sensation of thirst is always greatest when the deprivation of fluids is either sudden—as in cases of bleeding—or when it is long continued and extreme so that the whole tissues of the body are dried and shrivelled.

A great difficulty with which the nurse will generally be faced is that of persuading the patient to take sufficient solid nourishment in these cases, because the difficulty of swallowing dry food is sometimes very considerable. A little ingenuity, however, and the administration of measured quantities of fluid with the meals, often obviates this difficulty. In the case of bread or other dry foods, the use of butter either in the ordinary form, or melted, not only assists deglutition, but also provides the patient with a valuable article of dietary—fat—in a simple and easily-digestible form. In some cases, again, jam or preserves or Devonshire Cream are excellent additions to the diet, being not only nourishing in themselves, but enabling dry puddings to be taken easily.

There are many ways in which this principle of restricting the fluids in the dietary requires attention, and perhaps modification; but sufficient has probably been said to show the extreme need for carefulness in this matter, and any nurse with a clear knowledge of the principle, will, by a little ingenuity and tact, be able to carry out the details in practice. It is a good practical rule to obtain from the doctor, *in writing*, the exact number of ounces of fluid to which he desires the patient to be restricted; and to communicate this order to the patient and his friends at once, so as to prevent any disputes or friction in carrying out a detail of the treatment, the full importance of which few of the laity at first sight comprehend. Then it is well to measure accurately the amount of fluid given, and to administer this, in appropriate proportions, at fixed times during the day. This will often obviate disputes at first on the patient's part, and, as a general rule, after a very few days, the diminution of the dropsy and his consequent relief are sufficiently marked to persuade him fully of the importance of the treatment and the practical advantages to himself, and then the restriction in question will be accepted and persevered with.

The special benefit, both to the patient and nurse, in cases of heart disease, of avoiding any dispute on matters of treatment and dietary has been elsewhere explained.

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