

Professional Review.

THE HAIR AND ITS DISEASES.

An interesting volume of the Medical Monograph Series, published by Messrs. Bailliere, Tindall & Cox, 8, Henrietta Street, Strand, is written by Dr. David Walsh, physician to the Western Skin Hospital, London, and treats of the "Hair and its Diseases." It is a remarkable fact that while the practice of surgery, which was at one time in the hands of the barber-surgeons, has been long since placed on a scientific basis and elevated into a branch of the great profession of medicine, where it rightly belongs, the treatment of the hair has been left almost exclusively in the hands of the barbers, who, although plying a most useful craft, are scarcely qualified to prescribe for the scientific treatment of disease. We welcome, therefore, this handbook (of which the cost is half-a-crown) from a medical specialist in the subject.

In his preface, the author says that "the well-being or otherwise of the hair is a thing that appeals sooner or later to almost all men and women. In our present state of knowledge, however, much remains to be learned concerning the maladies that affect the human hair. For all that, great strides have been made of late years in this as in other fields of medical research, thanks chiefly to the fresh light afforded by the study of bacteriology. Indeed, that youthful science may be said to have already revolutionized our views as to the care of the hair, both in health and disease. As scientific knowledge widens it may be hoped that the treatment of this important class of maladies may become part and parcel of the daily work of the medical practitioner."

The author further says:—"Next to the skin the hair is, perhaps, one of the things most essential to the personal attractiveness of the individual. That being the case it is not a little curious that the study of diseases of the hair has not yet attained the position at all points of an exact and systematic branch of medical practice. Unfortunately, this lack, or partial lack, of scientific guidance, has permitted the treatment of many curable maladies of the hair to drift into the hands of persons whose qualification for the task consists in a prescription or two picked up from the pages of a medical work or from the medical column of a lay journal. The fact of the matter is that the intelligent treatment of diseases of the hair demands a competent knowledge of bacteriology, of modern drugs, and of general medicine. Almost all recent advances in this subject have been due to the recognition of the part played by micro-organisms in disease. From the point of view of the bacteriologist, baldness, for instance, is due to microbes, and is therefore preventible. Moreover, if the commonest cause of baldness—that is to say, Seborrhœa—be due to these bacteria, then it follows that it is an infectious malady, and can be conveyed from infected brushes, combs, and other articles. The importance of a matter of this kind, both to the barbers and to the public who are their customers can readily be imagined.

The popular ignorance upon the subject of the hair is ludicrous and overwhelming. The belief is common, for instance, that the hair is a tube. Equally absurd is the conclusion, founded upon that false assumption, namely, that singeing is good for the hair, "because it seals up the ends of the tubes." Another vulgar error is that hair grows after death. One of

the most widespread fallacies with regard to the hair is that it can be nourished by rubbing pomade and other greasy preparations into the skin. Like all other tissues of the body, including teeth and bone, hair derives its nourishment from the blood; but for all that it would be difficult to convince many well educated persons that the hair could not be nourished from external applications.

Indeed, no fable with regard to the hair seems too nonsensical to be swallowed by the people. One more may be mentioned by way of climax—to wit, the belief held by many worthy folk that the growth of the beard and moustache deprives the scalp of nourishment, and thereby leads to baldness. This absurdity may be compared with the popular trust in earrings as a remedy for eye troubles. In the present stage of scientific enquiry it is unfortunately true that not a few gaps exist in our knowledge of the diseases of the hair and their treatment. Nevertheless, it is equally true, on the other hand, that medical skill and experience can in many instances bring relief or cure. One great part of the battle is to have a case under observation in the early stages—a remark that has a well-nigh universal application in other diseases brought under the notice of the medical practitioner."

The book treats of the hygiene of the hair, the best soaps for cleansing it, the care of the comb and brush, the dangers of barbers' brushes, powder puffs, and towels, which are used for a series of customers without distinction as to the infected or non-infected. "Then the hands of the barber may convey the infection. In surgery the greatest care is taken to disinfect the hands of the operator and the surface of the body to be operated upon. The instruments are sterilized, and the minutest precautions are taken to prevent contact with unsterilized articles. Such a pitch of perfection is neither necessary nor desirable at the barber's, yet the customer is fairly entitled to demand that he shall run no unnecessary risk owing to the want of reasonable precautions."

Suggestions are made as to the reasonable precautions which should be adopted by barbers, and some practical hints and conclusions are given for the instruction of the public.

"The main thing to be aimed at by the barber is cleanliness—that is to say, in the surgical and not in the ordinary sense of the word. A surgeon's hands may appear fastidiously clean, and yet be charged with dangerous germs that cannot be got rid of without careful disinfection. So too with his instruments, which may be compared precisely with those of the barber. The best available means of disinfection is heat at, or about boiling point, and that can be readily applied to scissors or razors by boiling in a small vessel, just as the surgeon does with his knives. . . . The sponge should be abolished from the barber's shop. It may be replaced by a small swab of cotton wool that can be thrown away after use."

The second part of the book deals with "Diseases of the Hair and Hair Follicles." We are unable to quote at length from this treatise, but enough has been said to show the interest of the work. The care—not the treatment—of the hair is constantly in the hands of nurses, and this at a time when, the general health being bad, the health of the hair suffers proportionately. It is well, therefore, that they should be well informed upon the subject of its scientific care. We commend this book to their attention, and are confident that they will learn much from it.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)