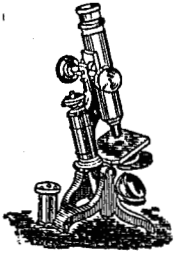


Medical Matters.

INFECTION BY VERMIN.



We have already referred to the action brought against the Mayor and Corporation of Lowestoft by Mr. William Garwood Porter, an accountant of that town, for £50 damages alleged to have been sustained through the negligence of the defendants or their servants in discharging the plaintiff's daughter, Amy Gladys Porter, from the Lowestoft Isolation Hospital in a verminous and infectious condition, but the case is of so much interest from a medical point of view that we are constrained to deal with it at greater length.

It will be remembered that the plaintiff asserted that in consequence of the condition in which his child was discharged from the hospital she infected two of his other children with scarlet fever.

The case was opened in the Lowestoft Court, before His Honour Judge Eardley-Wilmot, who, however, said that he should prefer the case being tried by a jury, and added that as the Corporation had repeatedly ignored his complaints as to the lack of accommodation provided in his Court, and as he felt rather sore against it in consequence, it was only natural that he should feel some prejudice in the matter. The place of trial was therefore removed to Norwich, where the case was argued at some length before His Honour Judge Willis, K. C.

In entering judgment for the defendants His Honour expressed the opinion:—

1. That there was no contractual relation whatever between the Mayor, Corporation, and Burgesses of Lowestoft and the plaintiff.

2. The child was received at the hospital by those who represented the Corporation, but the father made no promise to pay for its cure or entered into no arrangement with the Corporation as to its treatment. No doubt the Corporation would be under an obligation to exercise reasonable care, but this would be in respect of the child, not the parent.

3. No damage was caused to Mr. Garwood Porter by any breach of the duty to exercise reasonable care in the treatment of the child.

4. He was not prepared to say that if patients who had been received in the hospital were sent home through the negligence of those in charge in such a state as to impart disease there might not be ground for complaint, and, perhaps, cause for action. But he found that the disease contracted by the two other children was in no way due to the treatment received by Amy while under the care of the servants of the Corporation. It was not stated that the child went home suffering from scarlet fever, but that it brought lice, or nits, in its hair, and the parents, for the purpose of getting a verdict, had said that they detected indications of

scarlet fever in the very spots where they saw the action of the lice. He believed that under no circumstances could lice transmit the infection of scarlet fever to any healthy body. If that were so, then whatever the neglect and want of care on the part of the defendants' servants, the plaintiff could not maintain his action.

5. He did not believe there was any want of care on the part of Dr. Marshall and the nurses who had appeared before him. Having regard to the fact that some poor people's children might go into the hospital with unclean heads, it was most difficult to keep all the others quite clean and free. He therefore entered judgment for the defendants with costs.

From a medical point of view it would be interesting to know the opinion of experienced Medical Superintendents of Fever Hospitals on the possibility of infection by lice. We believe that in well-managed fever hospitals it is considered essential that the head of a patient should be free from scurf before he is held safe from the possibility of conveying infection, and, if so, then surely the presence of living organisms on the person of the child must be held infectious. From a nursing standpoint we have no hesitation in saying that we disagree with the view of the learned Judge, and hold not only that to send out a child with a dirty head constitutes a gross want of care, but it also points to the fact that if such negligence occurs in one particular it is likely that the general disinfection of the child was perfunctorily performed. In this connection the evidence of a boy of fourteen, that he was set by the nurse to wash the patients—a duty which was otherwise entirely neglected—is interesting.

Every Superintendent of Nursing—indeed, every well-trained nurse—knows that the care of “dirty heads” is a most important, if an unpleasant, part of a nurse's duty. On the admission of every patient it is a routine rule that the head is combed with a fine comb. Should it be “dirty,” then it is combed twice a day with carbolic lotion. In bad cases, and certainly in the case of a child, the hair should be cut short; if necessary, the head should even be shaved, but usually if a carbolic cap (that is, a piece of lint soaked in carbolic lotion 1 in 40) is fitted to the head and kept on for twelve hours this will suffice to kill the lice. Combing must be subsequently continued to eradicate the nits.

Every nurse worthy of her name will indignantly repudiate the idea that no want of nursing care is shown if a patient whose head is previously clean is infested with lice. On the contrary, it is to the discredit of the nurse if a child admitted with a dirty head is not sent out with a clean one.

We think the result of this action must be to make parents exceedingly chary of allowing their children to go into the Lowestoft Isolation Hospital.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)