

The Nursing of Heart Diseases.

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CHAPTER III.

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THOSE nurses who have carefully followed the explanations already given in preceding Lectures, concerning the consequences produced upon the general system by disturbances or delay in the circulation of the blood through the heart, will have no difficulty in understanding the importance of this fact. They will, therefore, adopt every possible precaution to save their patients from incurring any chill.

In this connection, it is not inappropriate to refer at some length to the question of the patient's clothing. It is a strange fact how few nurses realise the effects which bed-clothing produce upon a sick person. In a condition of health, few people even notice the weight of the sheets, blankets, and coverlet under which they lie at night, and they would probably be surprised to learn how many pounds they thus support. Then, again, the freedom of their movements prevent them, on the one hand, from observing the cramping effects which such a superincumbent weight can exert upon the mobility of the chest-walls, and, on the other hand, from becoming overheated. But a patient who is seriously ill, from whatever complaint he is suffering, is usually unable to move his position frequently; and then an ordinary quantity of bed-coverings often seems to be most intolerably heavy; because they are not only a dead weight, but exercise so much, and so oppressive a, compression upon the chest. It is needless, therefore, to add that this experience is intensified, in the highest degree, when the organs of the chest themselves are diseased, and when this external impediment to the chest expansion is added to the internal difficulty of filling the lungs with air or emptying the cavities of the heart of their blood.

It will be time well spent for any nurse to let the picture sink into her memory of a labouring chest wall handicapped in its efforts to relieve the breathless patient by the dead weight of the clothes piled upon it. The picture is most vivid in cases of heart or lung disease, but it is noteworthy in all cases of acute and serious illness.

What then is the great and obvious practical lesson? Not that the patient should be allowed

to throw off, in desperation, the coverings which cause him such distress, and thereby, perhaps, be exposed to the chances of a chill which are so anxiously to be avoided; but that from the first, his body should be clothed in a woollen or flannel garment, and that the coverings of the bed shall be as light as is consistent with the necessary warmth. If the temperature of the room can be kept fairly even and warm, less coverings will of course be required. Linen sheets, as a general rule, should, therefore, be banned in these cases, and one or two woollen sheets would obviate the need for heavy blankets and coverlets. It is no exaggeration to say that attention to this simple detail often affords such patients extraordinary relief. The removal of heavy coverings is often followed by a marked improvement in the breathing which becomes deeper and less rapid. Coincidentally, also, the temperature often falls—because the skin acts more freely, and with this the whole system obtains relief.

Incidentally, it is well for the nurse to remember that an additional reason for the use of woollen clothing in these cases, is found in the fact that, if the patient begins to perspire, the moisture will be absorbed by the wool; whereas if linen be worn and this cannot be at once changed, the damp garment will, by evaporation, probably give the patient a severe chill, and so bring about the serious secondary affections already described. So it will be readily understood that in all cases in which there is much fever, and in which therefore, it is most necessary, on the one hand, to avoid any needless application of warmth to the body, and, on the other, to encourage free action of the skin in order to reduce the temperature, that this question of the clothing of the patient becomes of the utmost practical importance. Indeed, it is so very general in its application in Nursing, that it is strange that the ordinary text-books seem so completely to overlook the point.

Further practical points are that, in chest cases, woollen pyjamas are more useful than nightgowns for both sexes, because the jacket enables the chest to be more easily exposed on one or both sides, and any necessary application to be used, with less disturbance of, and less chance of chill to, the patient. And in any case the garment should fit loosely at the neck and across the shoulders so as to permit perfect freedom of movement of the throat and chest.

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