

The Nursing of Heart Diseases.

BY BEDFORD FENWICK, M.D.

Late Senior Assistant Physician to the City of London
Hospital for Diseases of the Chest.

CHAPTER IV.

(Continued from page 228.)

INDEED, in general terms, it may be said that the extent of the dropsy is the best indication as to the condition of the patient's heart. When, therefore, the swelling only affects the feet and ankles, and mostly so after the patient has been standing or walking, it may only signify the presence of such heart weakness as to demand attention and treatment. When the dropsy has extended up to the thighs and is considerable, it denotes a greater strain and weakness; and therefore demands more active care and more perfect rest in bed. In those comparatively rare cases in which the fluid shows itself not only in the limbs but also in the cavities of the abdomen and the chest, the patient's condition must always be regarded as very serious; and a few words to fully explain this fact and to emphasize its importance will not be out of place.

The pressure of the fluid on the tissues of the leg or thigh, unless the effusion be extreme, rarely, if ever, causes any danger. But it can be easily understood that a large amount of fluid in the abdominal cavity may cause considerable disturbance to the general system by the pressure exerted upon the important organs which are contained within that cavity.

And if the fluid be contained in the cavity of the chest the patient will be in actual and constant danger, because, as it has been elsewhere explained, the compressing effects of fluid on the lungs prevents the proper action of those organs and so prevents the proper purification of the blood upon which the maintenance of life depends. So also, such pressure on the heart interferes with, and embarrasses, its action and thus disturbs the whole course of the circulation. If the pressure becomes very great it can be readily understood that the heart becomes, so to speak, paralysed; ceases to work; and the patient dies.

Speaking generally, then, the progress of dropsy is merely a question of degree of heart weakness. But it must be remembered that, once it has commenced to show itself, events tend to move round in a vicious circle. For the swelling of the feet and legs, if neglected, will generally be followed by an increase both

in the amount, and in the progress, of the dropsy. Continued and increasing pressure by effused fluid in the lower limbs causes increasing pressure upon their blood vessels, and therefore, tends to bring about still further effusion and oedema.

The golden rule, therefore, in these cases is to treat dropsy as soon as it appears—promptly and thoroughly—recognising its cause, as has already been explained. The doctor will then, as a rule, confine the patient to bed; and, if the amount of swelling be very considerable, he may perhaps direct the lower part of the bed to be raised about a foot from the floor, by proper blocks, so as to assist Nature in draining, so to speak, the fluid from the limbs back again into the blood vessels.

For the same common-sense reason, if the patient's chest is full of fluid, his body should be raised by means of pillows, so as to allow a similar drainage from the cavity of the chest; whilst, at the same time, affording the lungs as much opportunity as possible of obtaining their proper expansion. It is astonishing how much relief and comfort can be afforded to such patients by this simple measure; and, on the other hand, how seriously worse their condition may be made, and how much discomfort and even danger they may be caused, by being kept in the ordinary recumbent position.

Incidentally, it may be noted how needful it is thus shown to be, that the nurse should be well acquainted with the nature of her patient's illness, and with the consequent principles upon which his nursing must be carried out. Because she should then be able, in many little ways, to adopt measures for his comfort, merely by the adaptation of common sense to those principles, which she could not do if she were ignorant concerning the physical condition of her patient.

In the next place, and especially when the swelling of the limbs is considerable, much relief can often be afforded by gentle massage, the object, of course, being to assist in the more rapid absorption of the fluid. When this measure is adopted, there are two precautions which should always be borne in mind.

In the first place, plenty of olive oil must be employed, not only to lubricate the hands of the nurse, but also to soften and render more supple the surface of the patient's skin, which, in such cases, is generally somewhat dry and rough.

(To be continued.)

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)