

## 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 352.)

Next to the occurrence of Dropsy, attacks of *Palpitation*, usually associated with marked *Dyspnoea* or shortness of breath upon the slightest exertion, are perhaps the most common symptoms which lead to medical advice being sought by a patient suffering from chronic Endocarditis.

These symptoms, therefore, like that of dropsy, deserve detailed consideration. The Palpitation is often so distressing as to keep the patient awake at night and more or less alarmed all day, and is sometimes so extreme as to shake the whole body even when resting, and to make the heart's action so loud that it can be heard by another person two or three feet away from the patient. It may, in general terms, be said to be due either to weakness of the heart, or to its increased strength. Although this, at first sight, seems a paradox it can be easily explained.

In a state of health, the action of the heart is not felt at all; in fact, it may be said to be a sign either of derangement or disease when anyone is sensible of his heart's pulsations. This freedom from any sensation of an organ which is contracting with such force, 70 or 80 times every minute, as to pump the blood through all the arteries and bloodvessels in the body, of course implies that the work is being easily, quietly, and regularly performed.

So it can be understood that, whenever the ease, the quietness, or the regularity of its action is interfered with, the owner of the heart may become conscious of its presence and its movements. When the heart is weakened, either by ill-health or disease, its action becomes more or less impeded, and therefore its regularity is impaired. The greater the weakening of its muscle, the more irregular efforts will the heart be compelled to make, in order to fulfil its allotted duties.

It is in cases of dilatation of the cavities of the heart, and the consequent thinning and weakening of their walls, that the most distressing forms of palpitation occur; because the heart then may be fairly likened to a lame man halting and often stumbling in his walk. This form of irregularity causes the most distressing

symptoms which a patient suffering from heart disease can experience. He feels for example, at one moment, as if the heart were bounding forward as if trying to break out of the chest; and at another moment, as though it were stopping in its action altogether. The former condition is associated often with violent throbbing of the arteries in the head and limbs, and the latter with a sinking feeling as though death were imminent. Indeed, after attacks of this form of palpitation, the patient often says that he feels as though he had tasted the full bitterness of death. The nervous system suffers by the constant dread of a recurrence of the attack, a condition which in its turn re-acts upon the heart, and tends to intensify its irregularity.

The other form of Palpitation is most commonly associated with the opposite condition of the heart wall—that which has been described already as Hypertrophy, or thickening of the muscle of the organ. When this compensatory strengthening of the heart's wall is not excessive, palpitation is comparatively rarely complained of. For our present purpose, therefore, our attention may be restricted to those cases in which the hypertrophy is very great. Then the beating of the heart against the chest wall is constant and excessive, and often causes a feeling of pain and constriction over the heart's region, which is sometimes described as resembling an iron band fixed round the chest at this particular spot. The process, as has already been explained, is Nature's effort to compensate for some obstruction in the orifices of the heart which demands a greater strength than natural to pump the blood through the organ. The main danger of the condition is that it sometimes causes the rupture of bloodvessels; for example, bleeding from the lungs, or from the stomach, or more rarely an attack of apoplexy, according as the vessel ruptured happens to be in the lungs, the stomach, or the brain. So far as the immediate effect upon the patient is concerned, the occurrence of palpitation due to hypertrophy is chiefly detrimental rather than dangerous, inasmuch as it may tend to prevent sleep, because of the beating and throbbing in the neck and head whenever the patient assumes a recumbent position, and by the constant discomfort of the vibration in the chest. It can be easily understood, therefore, that the condition requires careful medical and nursing attention.

(To be continued.)

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)