

The Nursing of Heart Diseases.

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CHAPTER IV.

(Continued from page 492.)

THERE remains a class of Heart diseases which are most difficult of treatment by medicinal means and in which therefore the Nursing is all the more important. They may be described under the general name of Aneurism. This term is employed to denote a swelling or dilatation of an artery at some part of its course. It is usually the consequence either of some sudden severe strain, or of some slighter effort in the case of a patient with disease of the blood vessels.

In either case, the wall of the artery is bulged outwards, so as to form a hollow or cavity in the course of the vessel. If the condition is neglected, and the strain continues, or is repeated, or, on the other hand, if the blood-vessel is very weak and easily stretched, the cavity may continue to increase in size, until some day its wall is suddenly torn across, the blood gushes out into the surrounding tissues, and the patient falls down dead.

An aneurism may occur at any part in the course of any artery; but it is most common at points either in which there is a bend in the shape of the vessel, or where from the want of external support to the vessel, the force of the blood current is able to effect a greater internal pressure on its wall than at other parts.

For example, the most common position for an aneurism to occur is in the short arch made by the Aorta, after rising from the left ventricle of the heart, and where the vessel bends downwards to pass through the chest and abdomen giving off its branches to supply arterial blood to the trunk and its organs. Aneurism of the Aorta is mostly found amongst men, comparatively rarely amongst women. It is more common amongst sailors, soldiers, blacksmiths, and those who follow other trades in which severe and heavy exertions have to be made; or again it is found amongst men, and even women, of easier lives, who have suffered from diseases of which the effect is to weaken, or to render more brittle, the walls of the blood vessels. Amongst younger people, the most common of these diseases is Syphilis; amongst older people, Rheumatism or Gout.

When an aneurism affects an artery in the chest or abdomen, the diagnosis is often very obscure; when it involves an artery in one of the limbs its existence is evident and its treatment becomes comparatively simple, because almost entirely surgical. For example, the popliteal artery at the back of the knee, where it is unsupported by surrounding tissues, is not unfrequently the seat of an aneurism; and then the treatment consists in mechanical or surgical measures designed to close the bulging cavity.

In these Lectures, however, our attention must be concentrated upon internal chest aneurisms. It is important, then, that the nurse should obtain a clear mental picture of the actual condition of the tube through which the blood is being pumped; bulged out at some point into a cavity into which the blood is pumped, with the natural effect at each stroke of still further bulging the wall, and still further enlarging the cavity. She must realise that if this process continues beyond a certain extent, the wall will break asunder, and, in an instant, the blood will be diffused all over the surrounding tissues, with, in the great majority of cases, the immediate death of the patient.

Then she must see in her mind's eye, this same cavity into which the blood is only flowing slowly and quietly, with the result that as it passes out of the cavity into the blood stream again, it deposits all round the wall a thin layer of clot; and this continuing hour after hour, the layer of fibrin becomes thicker and thicker—just as though layer after layer of paper were pasted upon an ordinary wall—until at length the cavity is all closed, and the blood flows on again in its accustomed stream leaving a solid ball of fibrin filling up the dilatation in the artery, with the wall now flush with its original tube.

And she must also be able to see that, whilst the cavity is being enlarged by the blood pressure from within the vessel, Nature is striving hard to repair the damage by efforts outside, throwing out a wall of lymph outside the artery in its efforts to brace up and support the distended canal. In fact, many aneurisms are cured in this manner by Nature's efforts, within and without the blood-vessels; and without the patient being aware of the danger in which he stands; and, in many cases, without medical treatment being sought for the slight and obscure symptoms which the condition generally causes at first.

(To be continued.)

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)