

Night Terrors in Children.

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This is a subject to which curiously little attention is given in most medical works; but the importance of some knowledge of which to all who have the charge of children could scarcely be exaggerated. Especially when they are of highly sensitive, nervous organizations, children not only suffer intensely from these night terrors, but their sufferings are intensified by the ignorant want of care or want of sympathy usually extended to them by their parents or nurses on this account. We have therefore much pleasure in reprinting the following valuable article on this important subject, which appeared in a recent issue of the *Medical Times*.

In that admirable book of travels by the author of the History of the Crimean War,—“Eothen,”—occurs the following passage:—“When I was very young (between the ages, I believe, of three and five years old), being then of delicate health, I was often in time of night the victim of a strange kind of mental oppression. I lay in my bed perfectly conscious, and with open eyes, but without power to speak or to move, and all the while my brain was oppressed to distraction by the presence of a single and abstract idea,—the idea of solid Immensity. It seemed to me in my agonies that the horror of this visitation arose from its coming upon me without form or shape—that the close presence of the direst monster ever bred in Hell would have been a thousand times more tolerable than that simple idea of solid size; my aching mind was fixed and riveted down upon the mere quality of vastness, vastness, vastness; and was not permitted to invest with it any particular object. If I could have done so, the torment would have ceased.”

This quotation illustrates in a remarkably clear and graphic manner a form not uncommonly assumed by the complaint known as the night-terrors of childhood. It is not the commonest form of this most distressing malady, but it is one of the most formidable and the one that causes the keenest suffering and dread on the part of the victim of the affection. Not seldom actual illusions or hallucinations occur, the child thinking that a large dog, a fierce looking man, or some monstrous animal is threatening him. In other cases, again, the

malady assumes that form of terror, which, in the case of older people is known as “nightmare,” and in which the patient wakes up in a terror of undefinable nature and occasionally due to a sense of imminent suffocation sometimes caused by a feeling of constriction or weight upon the chest. In all the different manifestations of night-terrors the child may for some minutes, be oblivious of the fact of the presence of his mother or nurse, or, if conscious of their presence, may nevertheless be unable to recognise the same. As in so many other questions medical opinions differ greatly on the subject of the causation of night-terrors. But two things stand out prominently with regard to this matter:—the first is that “nervous” children are far more liable to the malady than are others. The children who are attacked are those of neurotic tendency, nervous, irritable, sensitive beings, who are always asking questions, and who are given to introspection. And there can be no doubt that, in the family history of such children, the occurrence of neuroses is particularly common. An aunt or an uncle will be the victim of epilepsy, or, possibly, may have been the subject of some mental affection. At the very least, some eccentricity of character on the part of near relations will almost certainly be present, and alcoholic tendencies may also be strongly marked, either in the direct or collateral relationships.

The second point which is, in my experience, invariably emphasized in these cases, is the dependence of the terrors upon disturbances of digestion. This disturbance may be of a chronic character, due to foolish indulgence of the child on the part of the mother. Thus, when constantly pampered, spoiled, and stuffed with chocolates and other sweets, a condition of the stomach and intestines may arise, highly favourable to the production of the phenomena of night-terrors. But, on the other hand, it is very important to know that the same symptoms may arise, as it were, acutely from the partaking of some particular article of diet. Of all varieties of food likely to be the cause of night-terrors none are more efficacious than tea or coffee, especially the latter. I know of one case, in a child of eight, in whom coffee taken any time after three or four in the afternoon invariably excited an attack of night-terrors, in which the sense of “solid immensity,” so graphically described in the quotation with which this paper commences, was very markedly present. So long as coffee was avoided, just so long was the night passed in peace; but

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