

The Nursing of Children's Diseases.

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LECTURE X.

THE NERVOUS SYSTEM.

Meningitis.—This means an inflammation of the inner of the three membranes which enclose the brain, called the "pia mater." The commonest cause in children is presence of the tubercle bacillus, the same organism which in the lungs is the cause of "consumption." The onset is often insidious, and may follow measles or whooping cough. The child gets thin and anæmic, and often fretful and restless, and may suffer from occasional headache, or vomiting, and may develop squint.

After a time the first of the three stages of the disease may come on with persistent vomiting which may occur at other than meal-times, and not be accompanied by other symptoms of indigestion, such as a furred tongue, &c. There is headache and fever, great dislike of light and sound, the pupils are contracted, the child prefers to lie curled up on its side in bed, and resents any interference; after some days the child gets more drowsy and apathetic. The pulse is often slow and irregular, the abdomen retracted, and the bowels constipated. There may be convulsions or paralysis of some muscles of the face or limbs. The child may grind its teeth. The respirations are often irregular, occasionally ceasing entirely for a few seconds, and then becoming deeper again (Cheyne-Stokes breathing). This stage lasts some days to a week, and is followed by the third stage, in which the child becomes comatose, with dilated pupils and relaxed muscles, though convulsions may occasionally occur. The tongue becomes coated, and sordes appear on the lips and teeth, the child has wasted excessively. The pulse becomes weak and rapid, and the power of swallowing may be lost, finally the temperature often mounts to 106° or 108° F. before death occurs. The total duration of the illness is usually about two or three weeks, and death is almost invariable.

The preventive treatment of meningitis includes everything which is comprised in good hygiene. When it has once declared itself the

case is beyond remedy. It remains for the nurse to watch the case carefully and report to the medical man any alterations or fresh symptoms she may observe, and this is specially important owing to the fact that the diagnosis of tubercular meningitis may be of great difficulty. Meningitis may be almost exactly simulated by inflammation of the middle ear, a disease which is very common in young children, so that if there be the least trace of ear discharge this fact should be at once reported. The nursing should be on general lines, the cot should be placed in the corner of a darkened room, which should be kept as quiet as possible. Feeding is difficult throughout; in the early stage there may be active resistance, and in some cases it may be necessary to use the nasal tube; later, it may be difficult to rouse the child sufficiently to take food, and the same means may be called for. If there be much vomiting the child may have to be fed per rectum. There is a risk of choking through liquids passing into the larynx. If there be much headache hot sponging may give relief, or an icebag or Leiter's ice coil may be used on the head, the hair having been cut short. Sometimes a leech or two over the occiput relieves the headache when nothing else is effectual. The constipation may be relieved by enemata or castor oil or other purgative. Bromides and chloral appear to relieve convulsions when these are frequent.

Hyperpyrexia may be relieved by sponging or an icebag on the head. The medicines which have been chiefly used are mercury and iodide of potassium, with the hope that the symptoms may possibly ameliorate; the former has been thought to be most useful, but in the cases which have recovered the diagnosis has been doubtful. Other forms of meningitis occur in children, but the symptoms are similar, and the nursing on the same lines as the above, and so no further mention of them need be made.

Hydrocephalus means an accumulation in excess of fluid within the brain, it is usually noticed first in infants a few weeks or a few months old, or may be congenital. As the fluid accumulates it causes enlargement of the head, the bones opening out like the petals of a flower, and so the sutures of the cranium are widened and the fontanelles enlarged. The general shape of the head becomes rounded, the eyeballs are depressed, and the veins over the scalp are enlarged; meanwhile the growth of the body is lessened and the muscular

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