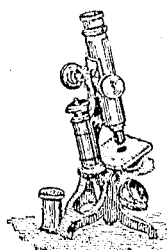


Medical Matters.

RATS AND PLAGUE.



M. Gamaleia, of Odessa, has forwarded an interesting note to the Paris Academy of Medicine, on the part played by the house rat in conveying plague, which was communicated to that body by M. Proust. M. Gamaleia has found that important differences exist between the rats found in sewers and those found in houses. Sewer rats are, he says, very refractory to plague, and if they do contract it by eating carrion, they do not infect other rats. House rats, on the contrary, are those which are found also on board ship. They contract plague very easily, and infect their fellows through the intermediary of fleas. M. Proust considers that the fact that the Continent of Europe possesses more sewer rats than house rats is the reason why plague, starting from a port, spreads only slowly through the country, whereas it will spread from one ship to another very rapidly. The part played by the *pulex irritans* in conveying infection has hardly yet received the attention which, from its importance, it deserves.

EMBALMING THE DEAD.

An interesting article on embalming the dead is contributed to the *Lancet* by Dr. J. G. Garson. He points out that the simplest means of preserving the dead is that of exposing the body after death to the influence of the sun and the air till the aqueous fluids of the tissues are dried up by evaporation, a method which is employed by some savage races to the present day, but one which is only possible in those limited areas of the world where climatic conditions favour rapid desiccation, and even in these places would not be available were the inhabitants collected together in towns of any considerable size. Such natural methods not being generally practicable, artificial processes have been resorted to from early times, so that, as far back as the time of the early Egyptian dynasties, the art of embalming is generally believed to have reached perfection, and to have been to a great extent lost in modern times. The author points out, however, that the art has not been lost, but largely discontinued, that modern knowledge affords the means of practising it much more thoroughly

than was possible in earlier times, and that the methods employed by the ancient Egyptians, though effective, were extremely crude, and only obtained after an expenditure of much time and labour, seventy days being, according to Herodotus, the usual period required for each of the three processes he has described. The Egyptian plan involved the removal of the abdominal and thoracic viscera, and the brain, subsequent pickling by immersion in preservative fluid, followed by the introduction of powdered herbs, and resinous and bituminous material into the cavities, and finally the swathing of the whole body in bandages saturated in some kind of preservative solution.

By modern methods the whole process takes but a few hours to accomplish. The preservative fluid is distributed directly to all parts and tissues of the body through the ramifications of the vascular system, just as the nutritive elements of the blood were conveyed during life. Preliminary removal of the viscera is unnecessary—in fact, renders the operation so much more difficult, that in cases where post-mortem examination of the viscera is wanted it should be postponed, if possible, till after the embalming process has been completed. The chief uses of embalming at the present day are to enable the body to be kept uninterred longer than would otherwise be possible without detriment to the living, as in the case of deaths which occur at sea, or at a distance from the intended place of sepulture, or where the friends come from a distance to attend the obsequies. Considerations which have to be weighed are not only the prevention of putrefaction and decomposition for a longer or shorter period or permanently, but the preservation of as placid and life-like a condition of the features as possible, and in some cases the imparting of a more life-like appearance to the face than it has assumed after death. All these objects may be attained by the proper use of the various chemical products put within reach by modern science.

The author then describes at length the plan of procedure which, he states, calls for as much knowledge, judgment and skill as does the performance of a surgical operation, and is not a matter which should be relegated to an undertaker, but should always receive the direct attention of the qualified medical attendant of the deceased.

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