

Medical Matters.

THE NEUROTIC ELEMENT IN DISEASE.

Dr. Guthrie Rankin, F.R.C.P., in a lecture delivered at the London School of Clinical Medicine, and published in the *British Medical Journal*, on the above subject, said, in part:—

In the field of surgery the advances of scientific discovery and the improvement of technique have been no less remarkable than in medicine, with the result that many disorders which were formerly regarded as hopelessly incurable are now brought within the scope of successful treatment.

But while great gains have been achieved in the conflict against organic and specific disease, the record is by no means so satisfactory when we come to investigate the vast field of functional disorders with which we are brought in constant contact. It may be safely asserted that our knowledge of functional disease is still of the most limited description, and yet it must be confessed that functional symptoms are rapidly acquiring increased pre-eminence in every variety of illness. Those who come after us will certainly find, with more accurate and penetrating methods of research, minute organic changes to adequately explain many manifestations which, in our ignorance to-day, we label functional.

This neurotic tendency is becoming so general, that not only are the ordinary organic and specific disorders influenced by its complicating coexistence, but it has also come to establish for itself a symptom-complex known under the name of "neurasthenia," which though possessed of such distinctive characteristics that it can be scheduled as a disease-entity, is yet, so far, unaccompanied by any organic changes by which a *post-mortem* explanation is yielded. All that we are able to say is that the seat of disorder is situated somewhere in the nervous system, and that the manifestations of a condition with which we are becoming more and more familiar, are obviously dependent upon disturbance of the great nerve supply by which the activity of the bodily functions is controlled and the stability of the mind itself provided for.

It has been asserted that the main cause of this great change which is taking place in nerve resistance to the powers of evil is the more rapid pace at which the world moves, and the consequent increased strain which daily life and duty imposes upon each individual's reserve of energy. That, in addition to these necessary calls upon our vitality, we are becoming too luxurious, and are striving to enter the kingdom of Heaven by the preaching and practice of a gospel of comfort rather than by the older doctrine of self-denial and hard work.

Whatever the true explanation be, it is certain that we are coming to recognise that the old order of things in disease is rapidly changing, and that in our management of the sick new conditions are creeping in which are tending to modify the course of many organic ailments, and are compelling us to direct our methods of treatment so as to counteract their hindering influence upon the natural progress of this, that, or the other disorder.

Dr. Rankin also says further:—What I desire more especially to consider with you to-day is the effect of a generalised neurasthenia or of the neurotic habit upon the progress of ordinary illnesses. And, in the first place, may I say that in my experience the distinctively neurasthenic type of person does not come out of surgical operations well. An operation is got through as in average cases, but no sooner is all anxiety as to recovery over than the neurotic element asserts itself more strongly than before, and ultimate convalescence is delayed—sometimes indefinitely.

After giving a typical instance, he continues: I do not suggest that an operation was unjustified; I merely relate the case as one of a type in which surgical interference is not well tolerated, and in which due consideration ought to be given to the general health as well as to the local condition before surgical methods of treatment are employed. If an operation is imperatively demanded to save life, all the consequences which may ensue must be risked; but there are many instances where the urgency is not great, and in some of them sufficient allowance is not made for the neurotic element which sometimes renders the diagnosis a little uncertain, and always impresses upon the physician the likelihood that complete recovery will be slow. The wound may heal as well and as speedily as in the case of other patients, but the nervous system does not rebound well from the shock of operation, and for a longer or shorter time—and much longer than most surgeons will admit—remains difficult of control and rebellious to restorative treatment.

THE CLAIMS OF WATER AS A THERAPEUTIC AGENT.

Dr. Baruch, in his introductory lecture to the course on hydrotherapy at Columbia University, New York, as published in the *Medical Record*, remarks that water stands easily foremost among the physiological remedies. He speaks of water as a stimulant, a tonic, a diuretic, a diaphoretic, an emetic, a purgative, a promoter of metabolism, an antiseptic, and an antipyretic. He gives a very good condensed review of the history of hydrotherapy from Hippocrates to our times.

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