

Medical Matters.

PELLAGRA.

Pelagra, sometimes known as Italian leprosy, is a somewhat obscure disease, which, at the present time—although only a few years ago Sir William Osler wrote that it had not yet been observed in the United States—is causing much concern in the South.

The main etiological feature has been held, says *The Dietetic and Hygienic Gazette* (and no doubt correctly), to be inherent to the moisture of corn, yet it has been considered that not until Italian immigration has the disease been demonstrated on American soil. It appeared in Mississippi with the advent of the Italian, and was first reported in America in 1883, when a newly arrived Italian in a New York hospital was found to be suffering from "Lombardy leprosy." In Italy the disease has been known for at least several centuries, and in Spain and the South of France it is also indigenous; but while, in these countries, only the very poor are attacked, in the United States poor and well-to-do seem to be equally liable to contract it.

The earlier symptoms are indefinite; there is debility, pain in the spine, insomnia, digestive disturbance, more rarely diarrhoea. The first distinct manifestation is the erythema (pellagra means "rough skin"), which generally appears in the spring. Dessication and exfoliation of the epidermis follow; and then roughness and occasionally crusts, beneath which are concealed suppurative areas. There now supervene digestive disorders—salivation, dyspepsia, diarrhoea, or dysentery. In the milder cases improvement occurs after a few months, and convalescence is gradually established. But there are severe, chronic cases in which the nervous symptoms (headache, backache, spasms, and finally paralysis and mental aberrations) become pronounced; there is gradually paraplegia and perhaps melancholia and suicidal mania, with, finally, pronounced cachexia. These latter cases are almost uniformly fatal.

Dr. E. J. Wood finds that the fermentation in maize, by which it becomes mouldy or musty, is one of the greatest sources of pellagra. The corn, besides being gathered green, is not always carefully handled; and is in consequence poorly protected from moisture. In practically all the cases studied by him the corn used by the patients had come from Ohio and Virginia, though pellagra has not been reported from either of these States; it would thus appear that the noxious agent must develop after shipping of the corn. Some observers attach importance to the heating of the

corn, which so often occurs in hot, moist climates before the cars are unloaded.

In Mississippi it is being found by physicians that the disease is increasing; and the medical profession in every county of that State is becoming aroused. It is likely that heretofore many cases have gone undiscovered, having been mistaken for erythema or eczema. The purpose is now to discover in so far as possible the hidden cases of pellagra (such as may be under treatment as other maladies), to collect as many facts as possible regarding the disease; and by concerted action to get from the Legislature a law for the inspection of all grain shipped into the State if it be found upon investigation that pellagra is really due to corn fungus.

Our contemporary says that it is extremely important for the South, apart from the danger to human life and the human suffering involved, that the matter of the causation of pellagra be settled. In the form of cornmeal, grits or hominy, corn is a most necessary article of diet for the great majority of our Southern people. Moreover, because of the boll weevil the South-western States are now planting more corn than ever. Any unfounded prejudice that is induced against corn will therefore be of serious import to farmers, who have thus far succeeded in substituting this food crop for cotton and in thus raising their own supplies.

RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS.

Cold and damp are recognised as aggravating that very painful disease, rheumatoid arthritis, and its victims dread the winter months. Little is really known of the origin of the disease, and active study is being given to the subject at the Research Hospital at Cambridge with the hope that some clue to its successful treatment may be discovered. Some authorities believe that there is a special microbe which is at the root of the disturbance. On the other hand, many specialists are of opinion that rheumatic gout is due to some disturbance of the nerves of the joints, and should primarily be treated as a nervous disease. There is no doubt that mental worry, anxiety, and excessive nerve-strain are sometimes quickly followed by this joint disease and the fact strongly supports the nerve theory of its origin.

The whole origin of nervous diseases is so obscure and so little understood at the present time that research into the whole question is greatly to be desired, and it may be hoped that during the investigations of the causation of rheumatoid arthritis some light will be thrown on the connection between other conditions and nervous disease. It is a subject which would repay study on the part of medical women.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)