

## Medical Matters.

### THE MENTAL FACTOR IN DISEASE.

In his final lecture on "The Mental Factor in Disease," at Guy's Hospital, Dr. Cameron said he thought it would be useful to nurses to discuss the relation that mind and body bear upon each other in disease. The public is quite familiar with the names of common diseases and with the chief organs of the body, and the sensations of the patient are commonly regarded as evidence of organic disease. The physician, as a rule, on the other hand, bases his diagnosis not upon a symptom, but upon the physical signs of disease. A symptom is that which a patient himself feels or suffers, together with all that the physician learns by conversation with him, or generally by observation of him. In eliciting physical signs, on the other hand, the physician brings his trained and practised special senses in order to bear upon the patient—the eye, the hand, the ear, inspection, palpation, percussion, and auscultation.

If the result of this physical examination is negative, generally speaking the conclusion is that the disease is functional, that the symptoms are to be explained by no gross visible disease, but by the over-sensitiveness of the receptive and sensory apparatus of the patient. If, on the other hand, physical signs of disease are found, then the symptoms become full of meaning and importance. A group of symptoms in one place may rightly be regarded as an expression of the exhausted state of the nervous system.

A physician often sees on the same day two patients suffering from heart disease—one who is so insensitive that he can hardly be persuaded of his own disabilities, and the second with a similar condition, who is utterly incapacitated by the same symptoms, yet the physical condition, the real capacity for work, and the expectation of life of these two patients may be the same.

In hospital one often sees the ill effect a sudden or unexpected death will have upon the more sensitive patients; only last month a patient died in one of the wards of heart disease of a sort not usually fatal, a few hours after the death of his neighbour in the next bed, whose case from the first was hopeless.

The effect of the mind upon the body is most obvious in functional disorders, those in which (were a *post-mortem* possible) we should find nothing to account for the variety of symptoms presented during life. These patients are described as hysterical, neurasthenic, and neurotic, and these words are used by the

public without any clear idea of their meaning.

In trying to explain the meaning of these words, "hysteria" and "neurasthenia," it is well to remember that every man and woman has normally in their composition certain elements of hysteria and neurasthenia. The hysterical subject is usually a young woman, although children and men sometimes suffer as well. She comes of a family of highly strung emotional people, who feel pleasures keenly and suffer reverses of fortune correspondingly acutely. At times she is wont to be aggressively happy, and is capable of extraordinary exertion both mental and physical, and at other times she is depressed and irritable, unable to give her mind to any project and exhausted by the slightest exertion. This undisciplined waywardness forms the soil, and the seed which we call "auto-suggestion" flourishes here greatly. If someone shuts a window, such a subject suffers genuinely something of the pain of suffocation. When "auto-suggestion" becomes still more powerful, and produces more striking but similar results, we may use the word "hysteria," a disease with a variety of symptoms, most of which mimic the symptoms of organic disease.

Neurasthenia is comparatively a new word, and means "nerve weakness." Unlike hysteria, with its varied mimicry of diseases, the symptoms of neurasthenia are not varied, although sooner or later pain in this or that situation generally becomes marked. It is the attitude of the mind which is characteristic; such patients are depressed, careworn, and worried, often resentful of examination and sympathy, though obviously miserable. It is an effort to talk, even the voice seems tired, utterly without occupation they allow time to drift, doing silly things not because of any real impairment of reason, but because utterly introspective, they are inattentive to all that is going on around them, and soon the concentration of thought upon their own condition produces its own results, complaints of various aches and pains begin to be made; they are taken from specialist to specialist, and sometimes operations are performed to try and cure the disease, which prove unsuccessful because the symptoms are only the result of an exhausted state of the nervous system, in part the cause of, and in part the result of, general want of nutrition of the whole body.

Weir Mitchell, the American physician, was among the first to appreciate this fundamental fact and to deduce from it that the proper method of cure was to secure rest for the mind and at the same time to restore the nutrition of the body to the place from which it had slipped.

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