

## The Midwife.

### Constipation in Infants.

In the May number of *The Practitioner*, which is devoted exclusively to the consideration of constipation, an article appears by Dr. Eric Pritchard entitled "Constipation in Infants."

Many of the points brought forward by Dr. Pritchard are of especial interest to midwives and extremely instructive. He shows that the infant is in grave danger of acquiring the habit of constipation, for not only is it liable to suffer from all the causes which affect the adult, but also from the absence of voluntary effort and from certain anatomical disabilities of the bowel, which predispose to inertia. The colon in the infant is relatively longer, more convoluted, and muscularly weaker than in the adult; so that it is easily overdistended and even permanently dilated and kinked by flatulence resulting from overfeeding.

At the same time a certain quantity of resistant material is needed to develop its muscular powers, and mothers and nurses are warned that the passage of formed motions of firm consistence and small calibre are not necessarily an indication of constipation requiring treatment; but that, on the contrary, they imply strong peristaltic contractions, and provide excellent exercise for the intestinal muscles.

Great stress is laid upon the importance of establishing the intestinal function on a firm basis of habit from the very beginning, and upon the danger of administering strong purges during the first few days of life. Dr. Pritchard demonstrates that meconium, owing to its physical qualities, is admirably designed as a medium of resistance to the first untrained efforts of peristaltic movement. These first efforts, he reminds us, modify all subsequent reactions, which, as with all nervous reactions, depend upon past experience, especially first experience, and become associated with a certain stimulus or series of stimuli, so forming a habit. If the gentle stimulus of meconium be replaced by a dose of castor oil, it is obvious that future reaction to natural stimuli will be much modified, meconium, colostrum, or milk becoming comparatively useless.

Dr. Pritchard even goes so far as to say: "I know of no series of doses of purgative medicine which are responsible for so much constipation at any time of life as the single dose of castor

oil which clears out meconium from the bowel of the newborn infant."

For the same reason, he strongly deprecates over-stimulation of the rectum by suppositories and injections. Here the nerve mechanism is specially sensitive and very easily dislocated, and if an unnaturally strong stimulus is applied the normal stimulus of faecal matter is by contrast rendered inactive.

He continues to say: "The tone and activity of the muscles which are concerned in the peristaltic movements are under the control of local nervous mechanisms, which in turn are co-ordinated and reinforced by a stream of efferent nerve impulses emanating from spinal and cerebral centres." Thus it is easy to understand that constipation is a common symptom in any disease which causes derangement of the nervous system. Children suffering from rickets and nervous debility, meningitis, hydrocephalus, and mental deficiency are all liable to constipation.

A pre-existing condition of diarrhoea is another frequent source, severe attacks exhausting the nervous centres and enfeebling the muscle of the bowel walls.

Of the forms of constipation due to food causes, a deficient quantity is common in breast-fed infants, while overfeeding is more often found with bottle-fed children and among the upper and middle classes. For the former, Dr. Pritchard recommends "test feeds"—that is the weighing of the infant before and after it is put to the breast in order to discover whether it is taking a normal quantity. If a deficiency is shown, supplementary feeds must be given, modified according to symptoms which indicate in what respects the milk is defective. Constipation in overfeeding is, in Dr. Pritchard's opinion, caused by the decomposition of an excessive amount of food in the bowel, the products of which poison the nerve centres. This form is, of course, easily corrected.

In every case the treatment of constipation depends largely upon a correct diagnosis of the cause, and some very interesting points are given in respect both to this question and to the curative treatment. Diet, drugs, irrigation, massage, and electricity are all considered. While, however, these methods are somewhat beyond the nurse's or midwife's province, the hints as to prophylactic measures are of the greatest value to her. Briefly, he summarises them as follows:—

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)