

## The Midwife.

### Ophthalmia Neonatorum as a Cause of Blindness.

Miss Caroline Conant van Blarcom, graduate of the Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore, U.S.A., writing in the *American Journal of Nursing* on Ophthalmia Neonatorum, says in part:—

During a recent visit to one of the large State schools for the blind, I was much attracted by a beautiful little girl who was groping her way through the kindergarten room, halls, and dormitory with her sightless companions. I made some enquiry as to her history, and the cause of her being in that school, and learned that she was the only child of a young widow who, when she lost her husband, undertook to support and educate this child after she became blind, struggling at the same time to resign herself to what she considered one of the inevitable decrees of fate.

It was the old sad story. The child's eyes became red and swollen during early infancy, and the mother was told that "all babies have sore eyes," that "cold in the eyes was natural," etc. The eyes grew rapidly worse, corneal involvement took place and total blindness, which might have been prevented, was the result. The mother's counsellors assured her that this was the will of God, and must be accepted.

Now, however, this mother knows the truth, and realises that her infant lost her sight as a result of a preventable, curable, infectious disease—ophthalmia neonatorum, and as she looks into the sightless eyes of this innocent sufferer, she appreciates the full force of the words,

Of all sad words of tongue or pen,

The saddest are these: "It might have been!"  
In this case the single sin of omission resulted in the saddening of two lives.

That is one case of blindness from ophthalmia neonatorum, and there are in the United States of America alone, at a conservative estimate, between six and seven thousand persons totally blind from the same cause. Seven thousand persons handicapped, blighted, deprived of the keen joy which comes through visual perceptions—blind as a result of ignorance and neglect.

This disease, leaving darkness in its wake, is not confined to any locality or country, but is a world-wide plague. Quoting from Dr. Julien Gehring,

"According to the Royal Commission for the Blind, the statistics demonstrated that in 71.99 per cent. of all who became blind in the first year of life it was caused by ophthalmia neonatorum, e.g., of 10,000 children under five years of age, 428 were blind as a result of this form of conjunctivitis. Ophthalmia neonatorum claims 26 per cent. of the blind in Switzerland, and in the United Kingdom 7,000 persons have lost their sight from the same cause. Magnus, of Breslau, says that fully one-third of the blind in institutions are blind from ophthalmia neonatorum, while Bourdeau forcibly exclaims that purulent ophthalmia neonatorum is alone responsible for nearly one-third of all blindness, and that it has placed in the care of Europe about 100,000 victims. This is equivalent to 100 regiments. In the last Republican parade there were 72,000 men and it took more than five hours for this parade to pass a given point. Now add 28,000 men to this number, and you will get an idea of the army of blind in Europe."

Since from 60 per cent. to 80 per cent. of the cases of ophthalmia neonatorum are caused by the *micrococcus gonorrhæa*, isolated by Neisser in 1879, the ultimate cause of this disease is frequently to be found in the social diseases, though inflammation of the eyes of the newborn may be caused by the Koch-Weeks bacillus, Klebs-Löffler bacillus, *B. coli communis*, *streptococcus*, *staphylococcus pyogenes albus* and *aureus*, *micrococcus luteus*, etc.

The immediate cause is usually the introduction of infective material into the eyes of infants at the time of birth. I say usually, since Stephenson reports 90 cases in which children were born with ophthalmia neonatorum well developed, and children have been born with eyes partially destroyed, demonstrating prenatal infection, while one case, reported by Feis, was born with corneæ destroyed and irides prolapsed.

Commonly, however, the infection occurs at birth, and the disease runs a rapid course, fatal to sight, unless prompt and efficient treatment is given.

In 1881, Prof. Crede, of Leipsic, Director of the Maternity Hospital connected with the University, conferred upon all future generations a service the value of which can never be estimated. He announced that the instillation of silver nitrate solution into the eyes of all new-born infants would prevent ophthalmia neonatorum. Think of what that means!

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