

converted into various toxins which circulate all over the body, and have poisonous effects on the various tissues. Of this toxæmia, the symptoms are primarily dyspepsia, vomiting, and giddiness; later on the patient passes into a melancholic condition, so that his life is a nuisance to himself, and by reason of the parading of his real and imaginary ailments in which he almost invariably indulges, to his fellows also. We all know the sallow, morose individual, with a muddy complexion and a furred tongue, and a firm belief that he or she is suffering from heart disease or cancer, who bulks so largely in our medical out-patient departments, and who seems to exist on a nourishing diet of tea and ill-natured scandal. There is, after all, something to be said for Mrs. Squeers' method of compulsory purification of the blood, though in this respect there should also have been a female department at Dotheboys Hall.

Many symptoms of seemingly obscure origin are really due to constipation. It is one of the forerunners of high arterial tension with its attendant evils, and in babies is often responsible for convulsions, which are usually erroneously attributed to teething. In older children, night terrors are generally due to this cause also.

The treatment of constipation is usually undertaken in the first instance by the sufferers themselves, and takes the form of investing in boxes of patent pills. So long as these are taken only for occasional constipation, no damage results, as they generally contain nothing more harmful than aloes and soap, with a little ginger, which may or may not have the desired effect, but if the constipation is of the habitual variety, no good is done, but rather harm, in that the bowels get into the habit of not acting without them, and the treatment come to rather resembles the equally popular method of relieving mental depression by repeated doses of whisky and soda. The remedies that are suitable for the occasional constipation are distinctly harmful when the trouble is chronic.

Let us take occasional constipation first; there are three remedies which are useful, and the first is castor oil, which, as an occasional purgative, still holds its own, amidst the multitude of substitutes which have been devised for it. It has the advantage that it can be given at all ages and to all types of patient, but it is undoubtedly nasty; to children it may be given mixed with honey, and adults can often take it easily if it is floated on the surface of a small cupful of strong coffee. If the constipation is due to a sluggish liver, calomel, preferably given in small doses of half a grain

repeated until two or three grains have been taken, is a very useful drug. The third measure, which is especially suitable when the others have failed, is a simple enema, which may often be usefully preceded by a few ounces of olive oil given also per rectum.

In chronic constipation, the first essential is to discover the cause of the trouble, and then to remedy it, if possible, by modifying the habits of the patient without recourse to drugs.

Two factors are often at the bottom of the trouble; the patient takes too little exercise, and drinks too little fluid with his meals. It is also imperative that he should make an attempt to empty the bowels at a stated time each day, preferably after breakfast. The modern practice of including in the diet articles like brown bread and oatmeal porridge, which act as gentle irritants to the intestine (though useful for a short time, and for some persons) has the grave disadvantage that the insoluble residue in the bowel is increased often to a considerable extent, and that the bowel very soon becomes accustomed, and fails to respond, to the additional stimulus.

But we cannot always modify the habits of patients, and attempts to do so often resemble the efforts of the newly elected house physician who advises the mother of the out-patient baby to give it two pints of fresh milk per diem, when she herself has fifteen shillings a week and a family of six children! So we are often driven to the use of drugs, and the first essential is that they shall be varied, so that the bowel does not get accustomed to any one of them. We have two indications to fulfil, to increase the amount of water excreted by the bowel—as opposed to the kidney—and to strengthen the movements of the intestine. For the first purpose, the most generally useful drug is sulphate of magnesia, or Epsom salts, and for the second, strychnine, or nux vomica; they must be combined, as either alone produces griping. Cascara may be substituted for the strychnine, especially in excitable people. If the patient is well to do, we send him to a spa, where the interjections appropriate to the nauseous taste of the water are silenced by the strains of a brass band. If he cannot afford this, we advise him to take the aforesaid combination of drugs on rising, in a tumblerful of hot water, and to satisfy his craving for music at other times. The name of laxative drugs is legion, but they all fall into the two divisions I have described, so that a variety in prescribing is possible and indeed essential. The important point is to treat the individual patient, and not only the complaint from which he is suffering.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)