

## Clinical Notes on Some Common Ailments.

By A. KNYVETT GORDON, M.B., Cantab.

### DIARRHŒA.

We have now to consider the reverse condition, namely, a too frequent action of the bowels, and here again, it is important to remember that diarrhœa is not always a disease in itself, but is often a sign of some more serious trouble. As before, I shall not attempt to give an exhaustive list of all the causes of the ailment, but shall just mention some of the more common reasons for its occurrence.

What primarily happens in all cases is that the contents of the bowels are passed on so quickly, that the intestinal walls have no time to withdraw the moisture from the liquid mass, so that undigested food and water are passed per rectum at frequent intervals.

This may firstly be due to inflammation of the lining membrane of the bowel itself, as in enteric fever, and dysentery, or cancer of the bowel wall, or it may result from the presence of some irritating food, as when a little boy has a surfeit of green apples, or an adult lunches hurriedly off a dubious and unaccustomed pork pie; and it may also be caused by disturbance of the nervous mechanism which regulates the movement of the intestine, as in the diarrhœa that sometimes follows a fright especially when the patient finds himself in a place where evacuation of the bowels is impossible.

We need not now consider diarrhœa which is due to organic disease further than to state that in all cases of persistent too frequent action of the bowels, a careful examination should be made of the abdomen and the rectum to discover the cause of the trouble; we will pass on, therefore, to the cases where an irritant has been introduced into the food.

In the majority of instances, the source of the trouble is obvious, for the patient will himself blame a particular meal, or article of diet for the occurrence, but sometimes we have to try to explain it for him. Here we have to remember that—apart from the presence of some definite poison such as arsenic or mercury—irritants fall into two classes, mechanical and bacterial.

Most of the mechanical irritants are vegetable in origin, in fact, all vegetables are apt to irritate the intestine more or less, because they contain cellulose, which is quite indigestible, and passes out of the body unchanged; thus a surfeit of figs or prunes may produce diarrhœa. Then some vegetable substances contain principles (apart from cellulose) which

act either on the lining membrane of the bowel, or on the ends of the nerves which move it, and cause purging; in fact, many purges, such as castor oil and aloes, are used in medicine for this particular purpose. In this category we must place fruit which is either unripe or too ripe, such as the homely green apple, and the much handled strawberry of the London streets.

These irritants are not always vegetable in origin, however, as in the diarrhœa of infants arising from milk which is unsuitable either in quality or quantity for the babies' stomachs. In the sub-acute or chronic diarrhœa of infants (as distinguished from acute infantile diarrhœa, which will be mentioned later) the trouble is more often than not caused by giving starch in some form or another, a practice which is inadmissible under the age of six months. A common custom in some parts of the country is to give bottle-fed babies a mixture of "baked flour" and water, with the result that the child succumbs to diarrhœa and convulsions which are usually attributed to teething or to that blessed Mesopotamian word, congestion of the lungs; occasionally, the equally hieroglyphic "suppressed measles" is offered as an alternative for the benefit of the burial club. In more enlightened (?) communities, pretty much the same result may be obtained by the indiscriminate use of some patent foods, which contain undigested starch. Babies, which are fed on milk (alone or mixed with water) may also suffer from diarrhœa, and the cause may then usually be found in the practice of using milk which has been exposed to the air for some time, or has even been left over from the previous bottle feed, and has, therefore, undergone some degree of fermentation. Breast fed babies hardly ever suffer from diarrhœa, unless the mother is in the habit of recruiting herself with daily libations of some particular brand of "nourishing" stout, which has been particularly recommended as "good for the milk" usually by the voluble female who officiates at the confinement with excessively dirty hands, and informs one that she has buried ten of her own. She also, incidentally, treats the diarrhœa, when it has arisen, with gin.

These forms of diarrhœa can usually be treated by removal of the cause, but it is not so with the bacterial varieties, of which the chief examples are the acute diarrhœa of infants, and the ptomaine poisoning of adults. In all probability these are due to the same organism, which is a bacillus intermediate between the typhoid bacillus and the *B. Coli Communis*; in fact, they all belong to the same family of germs. In adults they are

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)