

Medical Matters.

INSOMNIA AND INSOMNIACS.

In an article from a foreign contemporary, published in part in the *International Hospital Record*, Dr. Woods Hutchinson, the well-known writer, discusses insomnia and insomniacs as follows:—

“Insomnia is always a symptom of some physical disturbance or mental strain, and ought by no means to be ignored or lightly regarded. It is, in fact, one of our most invaluable danger-signals, the prompt heeding of which will save us many a break down. Yet the thing to be borne clearly in mind is its curious power of self-exaggeration, its tendency to make us over-estimate both the amount of our wakefulness and the seriousness of the results which are likely to follow from it.

“There are forms of insomnia which are the first sign of physical breakdown, or mental unbalance; and though these do not form more than 1 per cent.—scarcely more than one in five hundred—of all cases, the impression, unfortunately, seems to have got abroad that all forms of insomnia tend to carry their victims in this direction, and will inevitably end in some catastrophe, unless checked. As a matter of fact, even the 10 per cent. of cases which are not due to some temporary or readily removable cause, and which tend to persist in milder or severer form, in spite of all that can be done for them—even these might, in the vast majority of instances, run unchanged for months, and even years, without seriously or permanently undermining the health.

“The first thing to get clearly in mind is that sleeplessness is usually as easily curable as it is common; and that even those cases which prove obstinate, and resist our best endeavours, can almost invariably be brought within such limits as will not seriously interfere with either comfort or efficiency. The whole interest and practical importance of the problem centre not in the fact that you don't sleep, but in the question why you don't.

“Paradoxical as it may sound, many persons are unable to sleep well because they are too tired. They have driven themselves so incessantly, day in and day out, fifty-two weeks out of the year, in one rut and one mill-horse round, and their brains are so loaded with fatigue toxins, that they fall into a sort of waking delirium. All night they keep on thinking round and round and round in the same circles they have been following during the day, until they are ready to drop dead, like stampeded cattle or Marathon racers.

“To imagine that the peaceful stillness of the country will make you sleep, when the

whole cyclone of the city is roaring and raging in your brain, is simply ludicrous. If you can't sleep, it is a sign for you to make a change of hours—or jobs! To do anything, or take anything, at night to make yourself sleep is like locking the stable-door after the horse is stolen. To your tired, nervous system it adds insult to injury. Warmth to the feet, or cold to the head, or reciting the Declaration of Independence, is like trying to break a log-jam with a tooth-pick.

“One of the commonest, if not the commonest, single cause of restlessness at night is an insufficient amount of exercise in the open air during the day. Sleep is far more a matter of the muscles than of the brain; and if you work during the day entirely with the latter the chances are decidedly in favour of some angle or corner of it laying awake, either to dream, or to bother you with hard-luck stories in the morning. Get yourself thoroughly and comfortably tired at some form of pleasant exercise in the open air—walking, riding, ball-playing, tennis, rowing, fishing, gardening, dancing, automobiling—no matter what, so long as it keeps you interested, under the open sky; and you have pretty nearly insured a fair night's rest.

“When you actually find yourself sleepless the best thing to do, at that particular time, is nothing whatever; and the more thoroughly and completely you do it the better. Just make up your mind what you are going to do next day to prevent a repetition to-morrow night, and resign yourself to the situation. Remember, it won't do the slightest harm in the world to lay awake in a comfortable bed, in a well-ventilated room, for one, two, or even three hours at a stretch, provided you keep your muscles quiet and your mind at rest.”

Concluding, Dr. Hutchinson states that, “As for drugs to produce sleep, they can only be mentioned to be utterly condemned. First, because, even at their best, they merely smother a symptom without doing anything to relieve its cause; and second, because, without exception, all that have any real effect are narcotic poisons, and dangerous ones at that. The habitual chloral-taker usually ends by taking a dose from which he never wakes up. It is hardly too much to say that those who suffer from insomnia suffer more from the way in which they worry over their sleeplessness, and from the drugs they take to relieve it, than from the actual loss of sleep.”

Many nurses who are nursing anxious cases, and whose hours of sleep are often broken, get into the habit of sleeping lightly, and sometimes when the strain is relaxed are unable to sleep soundly. To them the above advice will be useful.

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