

over almost the whole globe. Since then, as far as Britain is concerned, it has practically come to stay.

The organism to which the disease is due is a very small bacillus which was discovered by Pfeiffer of Berlin in 1892, and can be found in the sputum in the early stage of almost every case, though it is sometimes mixed with other germs.

Inasmuch as these infective particles are very small and light, the disease travels through the air with great ease, and, in fact, is one of the most "catching" illnesses that we know. Generally, however, we can trace infection from one case to another.

After an incubation period of two days only, it attacks suddenly, so that the affected person is stricken down very rapidly. He has a violent headache—quite different, incidentally, from the dull headache of typhoid fever—with intense pain at the back of the eyeballs, spreading thence to the neck and back. His temperature is high—103 degrees or so—and there is intense prostration, so that the patient goes to bed at once. In almost every case there is a loathing for food, and the sufferer thinks that he is very ill indeed. He has a constant, ineffectual cough, without any expectoration to speak of.

Such are the initial symptoms of influenza, and they are due to the fact that the organisms are growing and multiplying in the respiratory tract (throat, nose, windpipe, and lungs) and are producing toxins, which are being absorbed into the blood and carried to all parts of the body. It is intoxication, in fact, but more remains. All the toxins are not burnt up and destroyed in the initial fever, but some remain in the system and produce damaging effects on certain organs, so that when the general symptoms which have been described pass away, certain complications succeed which really constitute the serious part of the complaint. Very few people indeed, except amongst the aged, infirm, and drunkards, succumb straight away to influenza, but very many die of its complications.

Probably the best explanation of these is that the influenza poison attacks nerves, and if we bear this in mind, we shall see how the complications come about. The effect of a poison on the nerves of a part is to lower the resistance of that part. So we can have various types of what is really the same disease.

The commonest is the pulmonary type, when the chief effects are felt in the lungs; there is at first violent cough without much expectoration,

which ushers in an attack of what is apparently an ordinary bronchitis, and the sputum, at first thick and scanty, becomes thinner and profuse until the disease begins to clear up, when it gradually diminishes, leaving the patient, however, with a great tendency to relapses. Or the bronchitis may go on to a broncho pneumonia, or sometimes a lobar pneumonia, but as a rule without a crisis: generally in influenzal pneumonias there is a great tendency to spreading, so that one part of the lung is attacked as soon as another part clears up. There is also great prostration.

Then there is the gastro-intestinal type, in which, after the initial symptoms, vomiting sets in, which may be accompanied by either constipation or diarrhoea, but almost always by some abdominal pain; the loss of appetite is complete and persistent, and the tongue is thickly coated. There may even be some distension of the abdomen; this type is often mistaken for typhoid fever. Or we may have the febrile type, where the temperature keeps high—sometimes very high—and there are no accompanying signs except the pains in the head and limbs, which persist for four or five days instead of subsiding. One hunts in all the organs for physical signs of disease, but without success; there is simply an excess of general poisoning.

These are the main types, but one has to consider in addition the after-effects which the poison may have on various organs. Of these the most important is the heart, which may be attacked in two ways. Most commonly the chief effect is a prolonged weakness of the circulation, the pulse being of very low tension, the blood stream, that is to say, flowing but feebly in the vessels. This accounts for the prolonged convalescence which is so characteristic of the disease. The patient feels no inclination whatever to leave his bed, and evinces not the smallest anxiety to have anything to do with his work or profession. As he has no appetite, and often no sense of taste either, it is difficult to feed him adequately.

But there is another and much worse effect than this, and that is sudden failure of the heart from paralysis of its nerves; the left side of the heart gives out in a few moments, and instead of contracting on the blood it contains, stretches so that the circulation is suddenly enfeebled: not infrequently sudden death results.

Then we have effects on the nervous system itself, and these may be principally in the nerves going to various parts, or mainly in the brain, or in both. Thus there may be intense

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)