

THE PROBLEM OF CANCER.*

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In Great Britain alone 35,000 people die of cancer every year. This rate of mortality means that of all who attain the age of thirty-five years, one woman out of every eight, and one man out of every eleven, will die of the disease. In face of these stupendous figures, no words of mine are necessary to emphasize the importance of the cancer question to every one of us. We have all lost relations or friends from its effects, and we all know the horror it arouses and the suffering it entails.

The problems of cancer are so complex and so numerous, that it is difficult to know how best to put before you the points of chief interest and importance.

I suppose that every one of you has at one time or another asked, or been asked, many questions about cancer, and knowing so well what those questions are, because I have so often been confronted with them, I would like to discuss with you the answers they should receive. As might be expected, the nature of the questions varies somewhat, according to whether the questioner is a patient suffering from cancer or merely an onlooker, as it were. The former naturally takes a more personal interest, and asks, "What is the cause of it?" and "What the cure?" The latter adopts a more detached and academic point of view, and he wants to know, "What is Cancer?" We will consider his question first, and there is no satisfactory answer. We do not know. We answer the question none the less, and tell him that cancer is a condition in which a certain group or groups of cells take on active and abnormal growth, and in doing so penetrate and destroy their normal neighbours. We know that this change is progressive, and that unless stayed by surgical treatment, it encompasses the death of the patient in 100 per cent. of those attacked. It is true that natural cure of cancer has been recorded, but these exceptions are so rare that they merely serve to emphasize the general truth of the rule that the disease, unless surgically treated, is uniformly fatal.

Both sexes are attacked, and at all ages, but cancer is chiefly a disease of adult life, the commonest age being 50 to 55 in men, and 45 to 50 in women. It is very rare in either sex before the age of 35, although every

surgeon of experience has occasionally met with it in quite young children. Any part of the body may be affected, but as you all know certain organs are singled out to quite a disproportionate extent. For instance, in women 80 per cent. of all cancers commence either in the breast or in the womb.

It is often asked whether cancer is on the increase. The number of cases recorded is certainly increasing every year, but whether this means that modern improvements in diagnosis are leading to the detection of cases previously overlooked, or whether this is a real increase, it is not easy to decide. It is probable that there is an actual increase, and that part of this, at any rate, is due to the slowly lengthening average duration of life, which enables more people to reach the cancer age than was formerly the case.

And now, "What is the cause of cancer?" Again, we do not know. We are entirely and completely ignorant. It would be possible to spend the whole evening expounding to you the various hypotheses which have been advanced to explain the cause of cancer. At the end of the evening those who remained would agree with me that they were all unsatisfactory and unconvincing.

We are not even certain as to what cancer is not caused by. We do not, for instance, know whether it is due to a microbe—indeed, the evidence suggests that it cannot be due to a member of any of the classes of microbes at present known.

It is true that twenty or more microbes have at one time or another been put forward by as many different observers. But I fear they are all one-man microbes, and that none but their pathological sponsors believes any of them to be capable of producing cancer.

It must not be supposed that I am suggesting that a microbe cannot be the cause of cancer, for it is to be remembered that for years it was believed that syphilis could not be due to a microbe, for the reason that none could be found. But everyone was looking for a microbe of the class that causes most of the infectious diseases, and when, in fact, the organism of syphilis was recently discovered, it proved to be a member of a class so widely different that it had never even been suspected.

It is possible that this history may be repeated, and that cancer may prove to be caused by an organism of a class quite different in its habits and customs from any at present known to science.

"Is cancer catching?" This is a question to which a much more decisive answer can be

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