

given, for we are on firmer ground. It is not, of course, absolutely certain, because we cannot put it to the test of experiment; but it is in the highest degree improbable that cancer has ever been communicated from one individual to another.

Nurses would be those naturally most likely to contract it, and yet, in the whole of a long history of the Cancer Hospital, there is no evidence that a nurse has ever caught the disease.

The question is one of the greatest importance from every point of view. The general public have very well-defined views about cancer—mostly erroneous—and they firmly believe that cancer is contagious. Quite logically, they act upon this belief to the extent of refusing to associate with or to employ anyone who is suffering from or who has suffered from cancer. This frequently entails great hardships, and I am often called upon to intervene with employers, on behalf of my patients. The advice I always give is that patients who have been successfully operated upon, or patients suffering from internal cancer or non-ulcerated external cancer, are free from any danger of infection, but that those with ulcerating or discharging growths should not be employed—and I say this, not because I believe the disease to be contagious, but because there are many and obvious reasons why a patient so affected should not be permitted to continue in employment.

As a proof of the infective nature of cancer, you will hear from time to time of cancer houses, cancer streets, or even whole cancer villages. That there are such things appears to be the case, and I do not attempt an explanation, because I know of none. But I merely suggest, that if in fact cancer were contagious, these so-called cancer houses would be much more frequent, and would not, as at present, be so very rare that coincidence seems almost sufficient to account for them.

*Heredity.*—The hereditary nature of cancer is widely believed in, and of course the occurrence of cancer in father and son, or mother and daughter, does at first sight suggest some hereditary influence. But when we remember the frequency of cancer, when we recall that of people over 35 one woman in eight and one man in eleven die of cancer, it would indeed be a matter for surprise did it not sometimes happen that more than one member of a family became affected.

The evidence that cancer is hereditary is so very slight, that there is, I think, no justification for adding another terror to the life of

those who have lost parents or near relations from the disease.

“Is there a cure?” Yes, there is a cure, namely, early and complete operation. Not the cure we desire, but still a cure, in a large percentage of the cases when the disease is dealt with in its early stages. What percentage it is impossible to say, for it varies in the practice of different surgeons, in different classes of patients, and above all, in different parts of the body. For instance, in the case of breast cancer, which is one of the commonest kinds to be operated upon, it is probable that 60 per cent. of the early cases remain free from any return of the growth. In many other positions such good results are not obtained, largely because the patients do not consult a surgeon until the growth has passed beyond his skill. Unfortunately, the opinion of the general public as regards the surgical treatment of cancer is not favourable. Even the most highly educated will not realise that, generally speaking, it is only the unsuccessful cases that they hear about. Patients do not reveal the fact that they are suffering from or have been operated upon for cancer, until concealment is no longer possible, with the result that the public hear little or nothing of the considerable proportion of cases in which early operation is entirely satisfactory. For this lack of knowledge—for which we ourselves are in part to blame—the public have to suffer, for instead of seeking the aid of surgery, they go to the cancer curers and quacks, of whom the most dangerous are those protected by a medical qualification. And so pass away those precious weeks in the early stages of the disease, when surgery holds out a reasonable prospect of cure.

*Radium.*—In speaking of the treatment of cancer, I ought perhaps to say something of radium, if only for the reason that it has taken such firm hold of the imagination. It is widely believed to be capable of curing each and every form of cancer.

The truth is very different. While it does cure cases of rodent ulcer, the least deadly of all the cancers, its power over other forms of cancer is very limited, and the number of cases in which its use has been followed by apparent cure is extremely small and disappointing.

None the less, it is valuable, very valuable indeed, for retarding the progress of incurable cases, which it does to a greater extent than any other remedy known to us, and it may do much more when larger quantities are available. But the lowest price of radium is about £500,000 an ounce, and there are probably not

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)