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THE
IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL
MERCURIAL TREATMENT IN SYPHILIS.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL MERCURIAL TREATMENT IN SYPHILIS.*

It is rather a safe assertion to make that there is hardly a physician who does not regard himself as perfectly competent to take charge of a case of syphilis. Since the time when the French called it the "Neapolitan disease," we have historical proof that mercury has been employed in its treatment and it stands to-day as the "sheet anchor" of the physician when dealing with this widespread disease. Not many years ago, it was the almost universal custom to require patients to employ mercurial inunctions. Latterly, however, since the advent of a numerous crop of manufacturers of pharmaceutical preparations, every drug of the materia medica has been converted into a more pleasant and palatable shape. The public in general has not been slow to learn this and the result has been a marked one in the manner of their administration. For the treatment of syphilis there have been prepared small pills or parvules, containing accurately measured amounts of the different mercurials and of an elegant appearance. So that when a patient is to be prescribed for one of his first requests being to have the medicine in pill form, if possible, as it is so convenient, these preparations are ordered. It is on this account and, of course, on account of other reasons that, of late, syphilis has been to a large extent treated almost exclusively by means of internal medication.

We know that syphilis is a so-called constitutional disease, infecting the system at large, and that all the lesions which make their appearance are but the outward manifestations of a cause at work internally. It is good logic to argue that if the cause be removed, the symptoms produced by it will also take their departure. But, clinically, we find that although this is true, it is attended by one disadvantage which is, that a greater length of time

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is expended and a larger amount of medicine employed than if the treatment was also local.

It is a matter of daily observation, almost, to see cases of syphilis, treated by competent men, where the patients become discouraged simply because they perceive no improvement in the local lesions. They not only become discouraged but oftentimes life becomes a veritable burden from the fact that they carry upon visible portions of their bodies the imprint of their disgrace and imagine, not without some cause, that every one they meet suspects the presence of the trouble with which they are afflicted. The natural result in such a case is, that they apply to some one else and either improve under the use of local applications or, receiving the same treatment as before, seek out some new physician or go to some vaunted resort for the treatment of such cases and there, under high doses internally and vigorous external applications, improve temporarily and thus add fame and renown to a locality but little deserving of them.

This state of affairs is not to be attributed so much to the ignorance of physicians as to the fact that, of late years, writers and teachers, prominent in the profession, when speaking of the treatment of individual cases or of syphilis in general, seem to have taken it for granted that even the merest tyro in medicine is acquainted with the treatment of the pox; and it would be difficult to find one who would be willing to acknowledge that he was not. Basing themselves upon this, their descriptions of treatment have been but hasty generalized sketches, the details being omitted and no especial stress laid upon the local applications. From this has gradually grown the idea that mercurials administered internally are not only all that is necessary, but that they are as efficient as if accompanied by local mercurial treatment, a fallacy which is susceptible of being controverted by a single experiment.

This subject of local mercurial applications in syphilis is today attracting more attention than it has done heretofore and a great deal of light has been thrown upon it, in consequence of this. Numerous experiments have been made with various preparations of mercury and both the endermic and hypodermic methods have been resorted to. Ointments of various salts of mercury have all acted favorably; some more so than others, either by producing less local irritation or by acting more rapidly. And it is the testimony of many that one of the best endermic

preparations is the freshly made grey ointment. Calomel ointment also has its advocates, whilst the oleate of the oxide of mercury is considered irritating to quite a considerable degree. The best preparation, as well as the most cleanly for this purpose, is the oleate of mercury in which the excess of oleic acid has been removed. By combining it with olive oil, in the required strength, a preparation is obtained which, for efficiency and ease of application combined with cleanliness, is unequalled. It further has the advantage of being unnoticed, attracting no attention by its presence as it is sufficiently transparent to permit the skin to show its proper color. In regard to the local hypodermics, various preparations have been employed, corrosive sublimate being perhaps in the front rank in regard to the frequency of use. Prof. Köbner, of Berlin, speaks highly of formamide of mercury, whilst others are equally as high in their praise of the tannate. Zeissl, Lewin and a number of others seem to be well satisfied with the bichloride, a number of French observers are enthusiastic over the good effects observed in the use of the albuminate, and there really seems to be but very little choice in the selection of these different forms. In regard to lotions of corrosive sublimate, of the formamide, of the tannate or of other salts, little is to be said as such a limited quantity of the drug comes in contact with the lesions as to affect them only to a small degree. Besides this, there is a lesser probability of absorption than when combined with more fixed agents such as the ointments or oils. For very light lesions and as a general deterative agent in the syphilodermata, Cœrtel's mercurial soap can be employed. The benefit to be derived from it, in a therapeutical point of view, is but small; yet, as soap must be used whatever advantage is gained from this particular kind is so much in the patient's favor. J. D. Stiefel's sublimate soap contains one-half *per cent.* of the bichloride, in accordance with the suggestions of Prof. Bergman, of Berlin, and is perfectly odorless, and acts in the same manner.

Of course, one of the interesting questions in connection with the subject is, in what cases or to what lesions should these applications be made? And it may be answered, in general terms, that they are applicable to all the forms of the syphilodermata as well as to the initial lesion. Should the chancre be recognized as such and present no unusual appearances, it is hardly necessary to use any but simple detergent measures. Should it, however, take on a form or process inclined to be destructive, the local use

of mercury will not only limit this process but it will also hasten repair. The eruptions accompanying the secondary stage are all troublesome to a greater or lesser degree, with the exception of the roseola or erythematous syphiloderm. This latter is generally so light in character that the patient will have but little or no concern respecting it and frequently be entirely ignorant of its presence unless his attention be particularly directed to it.

Authors, as a rule, recommend us not to make local applications to this form, as the internal use of mercury is sufficient to cause it to disappear. But, although this may appear to be a very valid reason, the external use of some mercurial preparation has this advantage, viz., that it prevents the subsequent pigmentation or diminishes its intensity considerably. In the papular, tubercular, squamous, and ulcerative forms we have a valuable adjunct to the internal medication in the use of local mercurials. And not only in these but even in gummata good results are frequently seen; whilst in the moist papules or condylomata it will often happen that these lesions will become intractable and not amenable to the most energetic internal treatment whilst they speedily yield to local medication. It is unnecessary to enter here into a detailed account of the various manners, in which to employ these local measures, nor would it be within the province of such a limited paper to give minute descriptions of the different local conditions requiring such treatment, and in what particular stages it would prove most beneficial.

There is one point, however, which ought not to be omitted and that is a mention of the fact that these limited local applications exert their influence, not by virtue of being absorbed and disseminated through the system at large, but because they act locally and within a very limited area. This fact has been demonstrated again and again. It has been found that local troubles existing upon the arms will not yield to local medication applied to the soles and feet, and yet lesions of the leg were benefitted to a considerable extent. In cases of condylomata only those, in whose immediate neighborhood hypodermic injections were made, dried and disappeared, others at comparatively remote points remaining until treated in a similar manner. I have found that, in suppurating tubercular lesions, only those to which the applications were made yielded and others had to be submitted to the same process before any amelioration took place.

It may not be out of place here to mention the fact that fre-

quently indurated or even enlarged lymphatic glands will be considerably reduced, even to their normal size and consistency, by the local use of mercurials. The same is true of the pigmentation caused by syphilitic eruptions. Although this latter will not always yield to the topical use of mercury, it will very frequently diminish and the intensity of the color, which is often so distressing to the patient, will be toned down to a much lighter shade.

In conclusion, the writer would state that no attempt at originality has been made. That the object of the paper is merely to draw a little more attention to one of the details of the technique of the treatment of syphilis, an operation which, the more it is studied, the more complex it appears. To reduce our art to a science is what we are striving to attain and the only method to arrive at this much-to-be-desired result is by the study and observance of the minor details.

