EMPLOYMENT OF BLISTERS

IN THE
DISEASES OF CHILDREN.

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To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—The excellent observations by Mr. Dendy in the last number of your Journal (p. 599), correspond so far with my own experience in the matter which he discusses, that I am induced to trespass upon your space with a few remarks upon the same subject. My talented preceptor, the late professor of medicine in University College, entertained a strong objection to the employment of blisters in young children, on account of the sloughings which he had seen as the consequences of their application, and recommended as a substitute for them the use of mustard poultices. Having had the opportunity at that period of my professional studies, as assistant to my late father at the University Dispensary (before the establishment of the University College Hospital), of witnessing their employment, more especially in the acute inflammatory chest affections of children, in which, after a due abstraction of blood, they are invaluable; and without this unfortunate result of their use, I was induced, with all due deference to my excellent teacher, to differ from him upon that point.

There is a vast difference between the appropriate use, and *abuse* of a remedial agent. The proper treatment of disease consists not simply in the exhibition of the remedy or remedies, which have been found by experience to be the best, but in the mode of their administration, as regards the intervals to be observed between their exhibition, the extent of each dose, and their due increase, as the case may indicate, and other not less valuable considerations. No one more forcibly and successfully impressed the importance of this principle upon his pupils than did Dr. Elliotson. (See his published Lectures.)

With respect to the employment of blisters in the treatment of the diseases of children, I can most confidently state that the sloughings alluded to have never occurred under my cognisance, when the precautions which I have observed have been attended to; and when I have met with them I have always detected, on inquiry, some deviation from the instructions given with their prescription, either in respect to the mode of dressing the vesicated surface, or as to the specified duration of time for their application. In a child below the age of four years they should be removed at the end of three or four hours, and a layer of fine tissue paper should be interposed; thus we obviate the occurrence of strangury, and other severe effects which present themselves when this safeguard is

neglected. It has been my practice to employ blisters of larger size than usually adopted (4 or 5 + 3 or 4 inches), and I have reason to believe with a much better result; and never, in consequence of such practice, have I met with injurious effects when the precautions which I deem essential have been fulfilled.

With respect to the dressing for blisters in young children, and the same will hold good in adults of irritable habit,—not a particle of lard should be allowed to enter into its composition, as is too generally the case in the cerate of the shops; this ingredient being frequently rancid seldom fails in the more delicate class of our patients, and more particularly in those who are the subjects of the asthenic form of measles, scarlet fever, and pneumonia (occurring independently of those diseases), to produce vivid inflammation, with ulceration of the vesicated surface, inductive of much fever, and not unfrequently terminating in sloughing. For the same reason the oil that enters into the composition of the cerate should be quite free from rancidity. The dressing which I employ, and which forms a cerate of harder consistence than that given in the Pharmacopœia, is as follows:—Spermæti, ℥ss; white wax, ℥iiss; the best olive oil, ℥iijss. The two former ingredients being liquefied in a non-metallic vessel by a gentle heat, the oil is to be added, and the whole to be stirred briskly until cold, to ensure a uniform mixture of the ingredients. At the end of three or four hours, I have, as frequently as not, found that the blister has not produced vesication; but a sufficient amount of effect has been left behind to promote a speedy blistering, so that on the removal of the first dressing we find generally that the cuticle has been freely raised by the effused serum. If we allow the blister to be applied longer than the specified time, in consequence of vesication not having taken place, much unnecessary suffering will be the consequence, much danger, and, in a certain proportion of cases, especially if, in addition, the quality of the dressing has been bad, death itself. The cerate should be of such consistence that you can only just succeed in spreading it upon old linen or lint. Kept in a glass-stoppered bottle under water, which has been boiled, it may be preserved free from rancidity for any length of time. In the treatment of cases of meningitis I have, after the requisite abstraction of blood, preferred the application to the shaved head of the ice or cold water Macintosh pillow to the use of blisters. I am, Sir, yours faithfully.

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