

USES OF CONSTIPATION

AND

ABUSE OF PURGATIVES.

EPILEPSY. INTESTINAL OBSTRUCTION.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—“Il y a,” writes Fontanelle, “des mots qui hurlent de surprise et d’effroi de se trouver unis ensemble ;” and possibly to the phrase “uses of constipation,” with which I head this notice, may seem to apply the remark now quoted of the French philosopher. Nevertheless, I am prepared to maintain, from frequent observation, and even experiment, that, in not a few maladies, a constipated condition of the bowels is advantageous ; an opposite condition, unequivocally hurtful.

Among the affections in which a considerable degree of constipation is useful, are certain forms of chronic rheumatism, certain cardiac affections, and incipient phthisis. In acute rheumatism, occurring for the first time, and in young and robust subjects, purgatives are useful or indispensable. But it is otherwise when the disease has assumed the chronic type, and occurs in persons debilitated by the disease itself, or by other causes, or in those beyond mature manhood and merging into age. With such, even moderately free purging is almost sure to aggravate the attack, or to convert merely premonitory symptoms, as slight sensations of chilliness, or fleeting muscular or articular neuralgia, into an actual and general attack. I have met in practice with various instances of such untoward results from an incautious use of purgatives in the circumstances referred to.

Of all the varieties of opening medicine, saline purgatives are those which, when injudiciously used, most disastrously operate in inducing or in aggravating chronic rheumatism. On this point I can speak confidently, from tolerably extensive and from careful observation. I have repeatedly known, in persons *subject* to chronic rheumatism, but for the moment entirely free from it, a severe and protracted paroxysm induced by one or two incautious and scouring doses of saline purgatives. A day or two after the taking of these, the patients have felt their sensibility of cold remarkably increased ; slight rigors followed, and in from four-and-twenty to forty-eight hours, general rheumatism has developed itself, which, in the course of the five or six subsequent days, has gradually augmented in severity. It is not altogether an easy matter to account for this peculiar action of saline purgatives in the affection under consideration. I am disposed to suspect that it is principally through the sedative influence which saline purgatives produce on the nervous system. The first effect of saline purgatives is to pro-

duce a serous discharge from the bowels, and consequently to diminish the proportion of serum in the blood ; relatively increasing, of course, the proportions of the fibrin and of the globules in that fluid. Now, it is obvious that this first effect of saline purgation is *not* debilitating. But what is the next consequence ? To repair the loss of serum, absorption from the aqueous contents of the stomach and bowels, and also probably of the aqueous vapour in the atmosphere through the lungs, rapidly and actively begins, and in a very short time the vascular system is re-distended with a serum of a much thinner and less stimulant quality than that of which it was lately drained. The nervous system, which, in regard to the vigour of its manifestations, is powerfully influenced by the quality of the vascular fluids, feels and betrays the sedative effect of this admixture ; hence the rigors, neuralgia, and other symptoms, which precede, accompany, and constitute rheumatism.

With regard to certain forms of cardiac disease, I have had equally ample proofs that purgatives used without the greatest circumspection, and more especially that saline purgatives are eminently prejudicial.* In dilatation of any of the cavities this effect of purgatives is particularly observable. In this form of heart affection, whatever weakens the nervous and muscular vigour of the cardiac parietes, must increase the embarrassment caused by the dilatation, even so far as to bring on palpitation or irregular contraction of the walls of the affected cavity or cavities, an effect which we have often witnessed, and which I have repeatedly had occasion to remark in the cases of two patients now under my care.

Thus, a patient of mine who labours under structural disease of the heart finds the symptoms to be invariably aggravated by the use of tea, sloppy diet, or purgatives ; while he derives sensible benefit from a *moderately* generous diet, from a moderate use of wine, beer or brandy, and from *constipation*.

Of the danger attending the use of saline purgatives in threatening or incipient phthisis, more especially in the case of strumous subjects, I presume every practitioner of any experience is satisfied. It would not be difficult to theorise plausibly as to the *rationale* of this effect of purgatives in the particular affection referred to, but as doing so would lead me into some details which would occupy greater time and space than can now be allotted to them, I shall defer entering on it for the present.

I shall, in concluding this notice, make

* I have elsewhere pointed out a singular affection, closely simulating disease of the spleen and heart, which is caused by purgatives and removed by tonics. (Derangements, Primary and Reflex, of the Digestive Organs, p. 264.)

mention of two cases which, though not connected with the subject of constipation, are of some practical interest and importance. The first is that of a man, about forty years of age, who, during several years, has been subject to attacks of epilepsy every six weeks or two months. I began by giving this man half-grain doses of nitrate of silver three times daily, which I gradually increased to two grains (thrice a day), carefully regulating, at the same time, his bowels, his diet, and his habits. In the course of a very few weeks, a remarkable improvement took place. The epileptic paroxysms were notably reduced in severity and the intervals between them increased. So sensible was this patient of the vast benefit which he derived from the nitrate of silver, and of the power which it possessed over his disease, that he was perfectly willing to run the risk of the discoloration apt to ensue from its persistent use, in consideration of the advantage which he felt was accruing from it. However, I next put him on a course of the ammonio-sulphate of copper, and lastly, of the oxide of zinc. The result of this treatment is that during nine or ten months he has not had a paroxysm. To those accustomed to treat this most intractable and discouraging affection the above fact conveys, in itself, a sufficient commentary.

The second case was that of a truly formidable obstruction of the bowels, attended with the grave symptoms of stercoraceous vomiting, of which Mr. Doughty, of Knightsbridge (in answer to a request from me that he would furnish me with the details and dates of the treatment), gives an account in following the letter:—

“4, William-street, Knightsbridge,

“Feb. 10, 1843.

“Dear Sir,—I think you saw the daughter of Mrs. —, seven or eight days after my first attendance, during which time I gave her repeated doses of calomel and black draught. * * * I saw her on the Friday: the calomel was retained on the stomach, but the draught was vomited; she complained of pain in the head and nausea. I ordered four grains of calomel to be taken that evening, with the senna draught in the morning, which I relied on operating; consequently, I did not see her till Monday morning, when I learned that the draught had been vomited, and that there had been no action of the bowels; she slept a good deal; the pulse was pretty regular; but she still complained of vertigo. I repeated the calomel, combined with cathartic extract and an aperient draught. When I saw her on Tuesday the latter had been vomited and the sickness increased, with hæmatemesis. Saline mixture, with small doses of hydrocyanic acid, was then given to allay the nausea. I saw her on Wednesday; she told me the saline mixture made her more sick. Small doses of calomel were then

given every three or four hours, with a strong aperient dose occasionally. It was after this that the stercoraceous vomiting commenced; and you saw the case, and ordered the turpentine enema with castor oil, and, I think, calomel in small doses. On the following day you prescribed six ounces of mercury and the tobacco enema, sixteen ounces of which, Pharmacopœia strength, I administered. This produced syncope and cold sweat. I think on the following day eight ounces more mercury were given, and the tobacco-smoke, to the extent of five or six whiffs, was administered, and in the course of the day croton oil, per mouth and rectum; and on the following, or second day after, the tobacco-smoke was again used, and after it an assafœtida enema was given. After the latter we began to have copious stools, and the whole of the mercury passed.

“In the evacuations there was a substance very like coffee-grounds, and on questioning Mrs. —, I learned that her daughter was in the habit of chewing whole coffee very freely. Is it not possible that this was the primary cause of this obstinate case of obstruction. I am, dear Sir, your's truly,
“E. D. DOUGHTY.”

I may add to the above detail, that immediately after I saw the case I ordered calumba and opium, to arrest the vomiting, an object always to be attained, if possible, in such cases. I also directed the attendants of the patient, after the quicksilver was taken, frequently to raise her up in bed (she was too feeble to raise herself), and to alter her position from one side to the other, from the back to the belly, and *vice versa*, with the view of favouring the gravitation of the quicksilver to the lower bowels. My object in ordering the tobacco infusion and smoke enemata was to favour the reduction of any obscure hernia or muscular spasm of the bowel, supposing any such to exist. The issue of the case was extremely satisfactory, and to me an agreeable disappointment; for certainly, from the whole aspect of the symptoms, even from the moment I saw the patient, I despaired of the poor girl's life. I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

ROBERT DICK, M.D.

Upper John-street, Golden-square,
March 14, 1843.

THE RAGE FOR INVENTION.—Velpeau and Blandin have both deprecated the present mania for the invention of new surgical instruments in France, as if surgery were not already overlaid with mechanical contrivance. Velpeau attributes this mania, which prevails mostly among young surgeons, to the ignorance of these youths as to what has been done before them; and he judiciously observes, that “it would be much better for them to study the capacities of the surgical instruments that at present exist than to invent others of which there is no need.”