

REMOVAL OF THE OVARIES AS A CURE FOR INSANITY.*

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Since recent advances in surgical knowledge have rendered section of the abdominal cavity a relatively safe procedure, gynæcologists and surgeons now frequently extirpate the uterus, its appendages, or both, for disease, as well as for functional disturbance of these organs, which fail to respond to other treatment. Frequently such diseases and disorders are complicated by hysteria, hystero-epilepsy, neurasthenia, epilepsy, pseudo-epilepsy and various forms of well recognized insanity which are thought to originate in and be maintained by the diseased or disordered state of these organs, and many insane women, both in this country and abroad, have been so operated upon, in the hope that mental and physical disease would be cured. In this State these operations upon lunatics have been, with few exceptions, confined to private practice, or general hospitals; but very recently the Trustees of the State Hospital for the Insane at Norristown have set apart a separate building for such purposes, and several insane patients have already had their ovaries extirpated.

In general practice these operations have been very frequently performed for the relief or cure of all forms of uterine and ovarian diseases and functional disorder, including those nervous and mental maladies which appear to depend upon or to be otherwise aggravated by such local conditions. The increasing frequency of these experimental mutilations, and their doubtful ultimate success, has caused conservative medical opinion to halt and to dispassionately discuss the whole subject and to inquire not only into the immediate but also the future results of such operations.

Medical literature and statistics of the subject are relatively scanty, compared with the large number of operations performed, which is, in part, due to the difficulty of keeping the subjects under observation for years afterward, as it is absolutely necessary

* Extract in advance from Tenth Annual Report of the Committee on Lunacy of the Board of Public Charities of Pennsylvania, 1892.

to do in order to arrive at positive results. Many insane, epileptic and hystero-epileptic women, who have been thus mutilated, have subsequently found their way into hospitals for the insane and are heard of no more. This is also the case in many instances where insanity has *resulted* from this operation, which is by no means an unusual occurrence.

Those whose duty it is to care for the insane in institutions are familiar with these ultimate failures, whose last condition is worse than their first. As a rule, to which there are but few exceptions, medical superintendents of hospitals for the insane now regard with disfavor the castration of women as a cure for mental disorders, even in those cases where there appears to be some causative or irritative connection, or sympathy between the disordered brain and the ovaries. From whatever physical disorder insanity may have developed originally, or may be aggravated by, the centres of the brain and spinal cord undoubtedly receive, early in the pathological change, such profound impression as to persist long after the removal of the alleged offending organs.

Extirpation of the ovaries in lunatics is only practiced as a last resort, after every other expedient has been unsuccessfully tried, and in such cases the brain and cord have doubtless become permanently impressed, or impelled to disordered action; functional, if not organic, deterioration has taken place. It is to these nervous *centres*, diseased or disturbed, that we must look in such cases for the real focus of irritating influence and learn by the abundant examples of failure not to hope for the relief of a central lesion by the removal of distant organs, even though they may *appear* to periodically aggravate the mental condition.

The ovaries of insane women sometimes present such gross forms of disease as to absolutely demand extirpation; but we do not allude here to these exceptional cases; it has been lately recommended and practiced where the mental disorder only *appeared* to be more or less influenced by the generative apparatus. In such cases, in our opinion, this operation upon the insane is not justifiable.

From the experience of those who have operated frequently upon cases of ovarian or uterine diseases, including the insane, hystero-epileptic and epileptic, it has been determined that, however beneficial castration may prove in selected cases in *sane* persons, failure has very commonly resulted in castration of the insane and epilep-

tic for the relief of their mental condition, even where more or less pathological change has been found in the ovaries.

As a general rule, to which there must be an occasional exception, we are forced to regard experimental operations upon insane women, for the purpose of restoring their reason, with disfavor, and to consider it unwarrantable and indefensible.

As to the practice of such operations in our State Hospitals, it is a matter of grave doubt whether a relative or guardian of an insane woman has the moral or legal right to give consent to the unsexing of the insane person, whose power to give or withhold consent is temporarily or permanently in abeyance. What redress would such a person have, if, on recovering her reason, she objected to her mutilated condition?

Such a procedure brings up the question as to the personal rights of the insane. Surely, if they have any rights, that of maintaining sexual individuality is one of the most sacred, even though, as is often desirable, they may never exercise sexual functions.

Woman perforce has to endure many hardships which man finds it easy to regard as the heritage of her sex. But suppose this matter of therapeutic castration should be applied to the male sex; a hospital superintendent, with equal reason and expectation of cure, might begin to castrate *male* insane patients, in the same scientific hope of relieving erotic or other paroxysms of excitement. The medical superintendent who would advocate or practice such mutilating operations upon men would be promptly denounced, if not legally prosecuted.

Although cases may occur among the insane, as among the sane, where removal of the ovaries, or any other important organ, may be required to prolong life, or relieve suffering, yet consensus of medical opinion at this time supports the view that insanity is not a direct and sole result of disease of the ovaries nor of any other part of the body which the surgeon's knife has, as yet, removed.

OPINION OF THOMAS W. BARLOW, ESQ., LEGAL MEMBER OF THE
COMMITTEE ON LUNACY.

I am of opinion that the operation of oöphorectomy upon insane women, as recently practiced in one of our State Hospitals for the Insane, unless necessary to save life, is not only illegal, but, in view of its experimental character, it is brutal and inhuman and not excusable on any reasonable ground. To quote a learned

medical opinion, "To operate on organs not diseased, for the relief of undefinable symptoms, hysterical symptoms and epileptic symptoms, is unwarranted." A lunatic cannot give a legal consent to the performance of an experimental operation. Nor can her relatives legally give such a consent in her behalf, and therefore a surgeon practicing oöphorectomy upon an insane woman, unless to save life, takes a great risk. He may take the risk of a criminal prosecution.

It is regarded by the best medical authorities as a useless and improper expedient for the cure or relief of insanity, and the operation of oöphorectomy in a public hospital upon indigent insane women must be regarded as largely experimental, and for that reason is bound to reflect upon hospital authorities now boasting of modern humane methods.

The Committee on Lunacy of the Board of Public Charities has full authority under existing statutes to prohibit the performance of such operations. It is the duty of this committee to "regulate the treatment of the insane," and this, whether it involves the restraint used, the character of food furnished, or the medical and surgical methods exercised in their behalf. The zeal of the gynæcologist is being carried to an unusual extent when it proposes to use a State Hospital for the Insane as an experimental station, where lunatic women are to be subjected to doubtful operations for supposed cures. If it is to be permitted in some forty or fifty cases, as proposed, it might be well to practice the experiment upon the entire female lunatic population, so that the gynæcologist may have the large opportunity he doubtless craves to see just what would happen. At the expense of some lives, the continued and aggravated insanity of most of his subjects, with a few supposed cures and improvements, he could read his conclusions learnedly to his gynæcological brethren, with the resultant added forward movement up his ladder of fame.

Dr. Wharton Sinkler, in a paper recently published in the *University Medical Magazine*, and which he read before the Association of American Physicians in September, 1891, says: "As to the benefits derived by patients who have undergone oöphorectomy for insanity, epilepsy, hysteria and the different forms of neuralgia and nervous troubles, the opinion of different observers varies to such an extent that we might believe that totally different beings and conditions were considered. Certain writers give the

most glowing accounts of the benefit obtained by almost every patient operated upon, while others regard the result as being always so unfavorable that the operation is never justifiable."

All of which proves that the operation is wholly experimental, of great uncertainty, and of very doubtful expediency.

This is the operation that it is proposed to make upon a large number of indigent insane women.

As a member of the State Board of Charities, I deem it to be my duty to protest against such a proceeding, and as the legal member of the Committee on Lunacy, I pronounce it to be illegal and unjustifiable.