

THE DYSENTERY AS IT APPEARED IN LOWELL IN 1847, HOMŒOPATHICALLY TREATED.

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In every severe and fatal epidemic, it is important that the character which it assumes in different locations be laid before the profession, that a correct judgment may be formed of its severity, and the most effectual means of relief, more especially when a course of treatment is pursued, differing essentially from that ordinarily adopted. With this view we briefly communicate our experience in this disease. Dysentery commenced in this city early in the summer, and continued till winter, but the greatest prevalence of the disease was in August and September. There has been, perhaps, nothing very peculiar in the character of the disease, but, like epidemics generally, assuming a more malignant character than we ordinarily find in cases of the same disease occurring sporadically. There has been also a more than ordinary amount of sickness and fatality during the same period, especially from fevers and bowel complaints. In these remarks we include only dysentery strictly speaking, carefully distinguished from diarrhœa or cholera infantum. The cases under our treatment have been variable—many of them mild through their course, and yielding soon; others of the most intractable character. In very many of the cases which we treated, the discharges would average once in from ten to fifteen minutes, making more than one hundred in the twenty-four hours, consisting of pure blood or blood and mucus combined, with other symptoms of equal severity. Indeed the frequency of the discharges of itself was not an indication of danger—and mere bloody discharges were not found to destroy life, nor did they constitute the whole of the disease. If the general excitement was subdued, and the disease became a local one, to a considerable extent there was less danger. In order to be brief, we shall give the symptoms of the disease, with the remedies which were used in its treatment. Suffice it to say, that our guiding principle of treatment was “*similia similibus*”; our remedies those laid down in the most approved scientific works on this subject, tested by the combined experience of the last fifty years. The doses prescribed varied from the 1st to the 10th attenuations of the Homœopathic Pharmacopœia, generally the lower in the more acute and urgent cases. On these we depended *entirely*, nor shall we soon forget the many examples of the most formidable states of disease yielding in a manner unprecedented in our former knowledge and practice of the healing art. The following were the principal remedies used, and a few of the more prominent indications—not sufficiently detailed, however, for a guide to others, without reference to published works on the subject.

1st. *Aconitum napellus*. This article was used often in the early stage, especially when attended with a high degree of entonic action, with a dry skin, full, frequent or hard pulse, with much soreness in the abdomen. The general and local inflammatory symptoms were speedily

subdued by it. A few drops were given, say six to ten in a tumbler of water, giving tablespoonful doses. Our medicines in severe cases were often repeated, generally in from one to two hours, and sometimes oftener. Frequently two remedies were used in alternation in a case, not in combination.

2d. *Colocynth*. In the early stage of many cases there would be found frequent and copious discharges, first of a bilious character, but soon mixed with blood, attended with severe griping pains in the epigastrium, the character of the pains resembling *colic*, with great soreness to the touch, and sometimes nausea and vomiting, involving the higher portions of the alimentary track. These cases were very urgent and severe, receiving, we believe, the popular appellation of cholera, soon producing great exhaustion and confirmed bloody motions. In these cases colocynth acted like a charm; indeed, we believe, in not a single case did it fail to relieve that peculiar *colic pain*, and that often almost instantly—so much so, that patients of this class kept a few powders by them for an emergency. If there was high inflammatory action, this remedy was preceded by or alternated with aconite.

3d. *Mercury*. This was our sheet anchor; in short, it is the *great remedy* in epidemic autumnal dysentery—and yet, in the ordinary practice, we are told that it did not produce a happy effect. There is, however, a difference in giving it in a crude form, producing an irritation on the mucous surface merely, and being prepared so as to be as diffusable as any article of the *materia medica*. Simple mercury and corrosive sublimate were both used, to good effect, and were in most cases given occasionally through the course of the disease. For the blood discharges with tormina and tenesmus, nothing equals it when given homœopathically. In many cases the violent pains would be relieved immediately, so that the patients would inquire if they had not taken a *powerful anodyne* (opiate). It required often repeating in urgent cases. In many cases the disease was cut short at once by a few *doses*. It seemed to control all the morbid phenomena, and prepare the way for a speedy convalescence.

4th. *Nux vomica* was a valuable remedy in some constitutions; and in cases where there was a continual tenesmus, with very small frequent stools, and a sensation not unlike a severe case of hemorrhoids, its effect was very great.

5th. *Arsenic and Rhus Toxicodendron* were the appropriate remedies in the advanced stages or early sinking—and malignant symptoms; but happily when timely seen, and the proper remedies were used, it was seldom necessary to resort to these potent agents. Especially in cases of worn-out subjects which had been neglected, where the stools were painless and like the wash of beef, and involuntary, was the *rhys* very valuable; and the arsenic where there was some nausea, with epigastric sinking, and the discharges watery and of dark color, with great general debility, and offensive or aphthous mouth.

6th. *Ipecacuanha*, bryonia, chamomile, pulsatilla, sulphur and some

other articles were used, and were of essential value, as they were severally indicated—the details of which we will omit.

As to regimen, we are not aware that anything peculiar entered into our plan. Avoidance of strong acids, aromatics, &c., is most that was insisted upon. A free use of simple cool drinks, with liquid food, as bread water, gruel, sago, &c., was allowed. In a few cases of considerable heat of the surface, sponging with water occasionally was used. Convalescence in most cases was rapid, and perfect health soon regained, the digestive organs remaining in a condition to receive nourishment early. The duration of the disease was, we think, comparatively short, very few being confined over two weeks; and in a majority of cases, in which the early symptoms were of a very grave character, a very much shorter period was required.

Fatality. The epidemic in this city, on the whole, has been considered as rather fatal, and yet, probably, not more so than is often witnessed. The whole number of deaths in Lowell, from dysentery, from July to December, taken from reports made out by the superintendent of burials, was 194. This is probably much below the actual number, as many are removed from this place for burial—one fourth of our population being transient residents. The whole number of cases treated we have no means of estimating. It has been estimated at from 2000 to 2500.

The proportion of deaths to the number of cases treated in the city cannot be known to us exactly, any farther than those of our own peculiar treatment. We have been informed by several reputable physicians, of the ordinary practice, that about 1 in every 10 or 12 have died—and this has been near the estimate, we believe, in severe epidemic dysenteries in previous years and in different locations. Perhaps some allowance should here be made for those cases which have had no medical treatment; especially so, if a larger per cent. of such have died. Exact statistics on this point would be interesting.

The whole number of cases treated homœopathically was 156. Of these, 2 only proved fatal. One of these, a child between 1 and 2 years of age, sunk after a severe attack of about a week; and the other was a young lady, about 30, with dysentery and typhoid fever combined. In this latter case, there was early prostration; pulse 120 to 130, and the discharges over one hundred per day, of nearly pure blood and very painful. After the abatement of the dysenteric symptoms, the febrile action and frequent pulse continued, with all the characteristics of typhoid fever, for two or three weeks, when an improvement commenced, the fever abated, the pulse was reduced to 108, and the appetite improved, till about the 25th day, when swelling of the parotid gland supervened, and she sank about the 30th day. The number of cases which were commenced with homœopathic treatment, and changed to allopathic, was 2; and the number commenced with the ordinary treatment and changed during the treatment to the homœopathic, was 10. Several of these latter were desperate cases, and beyond the expectation of relief by the attending physician; but they all recovered. There were also four or five cases which we were called to see after being given over by the at-

tending physician, and nearly or quite in *articulo mortis*, which died in from one to two or three days. From these facts it will be apparent, that, as an epidemic, the disease has on the whole been severe. A very large proportion of the cases which fell under our treatment were grave cases, especially at their onset—and a far greater proportion of our cases recovered than we should *a priori* have had any reason to expect. And yet, as far as we are able to learn, the same mode of practice has been equally successful elsewhere in this disease. Nor do we apprehend that this success is peculiar to this disease. Although our proportion of deaths is comparatively small, we would not have it understood that the practice we adopt, though it may be pleasant for the patient, is either simple or easy for the practitioner. On the other hand, it requires the closest examination of the patient, the most accurate diagnosis, and the most discriminating application of the remedies, to meet the varied abnormal conditions of the system, neutralize, as it were, the diseased action, and restore the healthy functions.

Lowell, Dec. 15th, 1847.

REPREHENSIBLE PRESCRIPTIONS AGAIN.

To the Editor of the Boston Medical and Surgical Journal.

DEAR SIR,—In writing the article on reprehensible prescriptions, signed *Medicus*, we had not the least idea of inviting a pen and ink contest. It seems that a random shot in its descent has fallen upon some one, and the father of the recipe has appeared in its defence. Such is the character of the response, that we deem a reply both right and proper. Before animadverting in particular upon the remarks of W. W. C., we wish in the outset to explain a little. When penning the article as indicated above, we were perfectly well aware, that the theory of medicine was one thing, and its practice quite another; and that the same was true of doses of medicines. And this was learned from three years' observation as we "walked" the Massachusetts Hospital, and by two years' practice in one of the Dispensary districts, which was second to but one district in the city in point of numbers, and also by three years' practice since that period. Habit is second nature, and doses of medicines, which would prove fatal to persons unaccustomed to their use, may be taken with impunity by those habituated to them—such persons at first commencing with medium doses. As witness opium chewers. Our article should, perhaps, have been thus qualified in this respect. With this explanation, we hesitate not to say, that if the prescription of five grains of morphia was given in a case of ordinary sickness, and the patient was unused to such medicine, in all probability it would have proved fatal. And we would remark still further, that the recipe in question excited the surprise and inquiry of one of the oldest and most respectable practitioners in this city, one who has seen as much practice as any other man of his years.