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ORIGINAL ARTICLES.

ACUTE PSYCHOSES ARISING DURING THE COURSE OF
HEART DISEASE.¹

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ACUTE mental disturbances sometimes appear during the course of heart disease with such startling suddenness as to disconcert the attending physician and to prove a severe shock to the patient's family. The majority of text-books are silent on this subject, yet the condition is one upon which both from the point of view of etiology and of prognosis much light is needed. Dr. Head, in 1901, in a masterly article,² called attention to the mental changes accompanying visceral disease, including heart affections; he concerned himself, however, chiefly with hallucinations of sight, sound and smell, and states of mild depression or exaltation, which he analyzed with very keen insight. In keeping with the opinion of the day in which he wrote, he speaks of aortic valve disease, mitral regurgitation and mitral stenosis, but does not mention that great group of cardiac affections in which valvular lesions play a subordinate or negligible part.

It is of course well known that cardiac patients often are depressed and irritable, particularly after decompensation has been established, and sleep, digestion and respiration are in consequence disturbed. The particular state of mind is closely related to the

¹ Read before the Association of American Physicians, Atlantic City, N. J., May 4, 1920.

² Brain, 1901, 24, 345.

patient's temperamental make-up and to his philosophy of life. I once had under my care a woman, aged about forty years, with the most hopeless cardiac break, with dropsy, serous effusions, large liver, cyanosis, insomnia and orthopnea, who until her death maintained a perfect sweetness of disposition and a hopefulness of spirit that was greater than any *spes phthisica* that I have ever witnessed. On the other hand, I have seen patients who when decompensation was far advanced, by their fretfulness and their unreasonable demands, made life miserable for family, doctor and nurse. But while such a mental condition is abnormal it cannot be called a true psychosis. Nor shall I consider among the cardiac psychoses the delirium of acute and subacute septic endocarditis, since that is dependent more upon the infectious toxemia than upon the heart disease as such.

The manifestations of true psychoses are quite varied. Among the more important types are the following:

1. **Hallucinations** of sight and sound, more rarely of smell. These were found by Head³ to be most frequent in aortic disease. The auditory hallucinations consist chiefly of rhythmic sounds like the tolling of bells or of kaecking; the visual usually take the form of the face of a man or woman with dimly outlined body standing at the foot of the bed or stalking slowly across the room. The patients as a rule recognize the hallucinatory character of the sound or vision and are disinclined to speak of it until the physician has gained their confidence. Hirschfelder⁴ states that a number of patients admitted having hallucinations after he had assured them that visual hallucinations were not uncommon in their disease and were merely to be regarded as troublesome but not as significant features. All who gave positive answers accurately described the visual hallucination as detailed above.

The hallucinations are to be looked upon as misinterpreted sensations caused either by anemia or by venous stasis of definite brain centers—those connected with sight or hearing—or by circulatory or trophic disturbances in the corresponding peripheral end-organs. They are usually of a transitory character and do not affect the prognosis in any definite manner.

2. The most common cardiac psychosis is a state of *confusion*, in some cases present only as the patient awakens from sleep or is about to go to sleep; in others it is a more or less constant symptom. The patient confuses his surroundings, is disorientated as to time but may become rational when his attention is sufficiently aroused. This mild type of psychosis is common in myocardial cases with auricular fibrillation with or without decompensation. The less the natural sleep the greater the confusion.

³ Loc. cit.

⁴ *Diseases of the Heart and Aorta*, Philadelphia, 1918, p. 229.

3. In some cases, especially in elderly persons suffering with fibroid myocarditis, the mental state is one of *excitation with decided disorientation*. Such a type is illustrated by the following case:

Mrs. F. H. W., aged seventy years, with cardiac hypertrophy and hypertension, dyspnea on exertion and a little edema of the lower limbs, suddenly began to exhibit a state of mental confusion and excitation which was most marked when she awakened from sleep. She would stare excitedly about the room, talk incoherently and try to get out of bed. When engaged in conversation, she answered most questions pertaining to herself quite well, but to those dealing with the day's events or with familiar contemporary history, she gave confused and inappropriate answers. There was no evidence of motor weakness or paralysis; indeed, she seemed surprisingly strong. The urine contained a faint trace of albumin, no casts, no blood, but a very large quantity of urates; its specific gravity ranged from 1012 to 1022.

The prognosis in such cases is not good, death usually following within a few weeks after the onset of the psychosis. The patient may, however, clear up if the myocardial degeneration has not gone too far and if no complications ensue. In the case just mentioned a pneumonia supervened.

In some cases the state of excitement alternates with one of complete apathy and silence—the patient may sit up promptly when the doctor approaches and may stare directly at him, but answers no questions and does not betray by any sign that he understands what is said to him. Such taciturn myocardial patients have to be watched as they may suddenly become agitated, get out of bed, and make powerful muscular efforts that may end in collapse.

4. Perhaps the most interesting, certainly the most startling disturbance arising in diseases of the heart is *acute mania* which may appear with the suddenness of an apoplexy and for a time defy all efforts at control. I have seen it appear under two conditions: in acute pericarditis and in advanced decompensation of myocardial origin. Its occurrence in pericarditis was pointed out long ago by Da Costa. The late F. A. Packard was the first to bring it to my attention when I was his intern in the Philadelphia General Hospital. We had in our ward a woman, Louisa Wilbur, who had an acute fibrinous pericarditis, the cause of which I do not remember. One day without warning she suddenly became wild and maniacal and had to be restrained. She remained in her state of mania until death. This experience impressed upon me the importance of examining for pericarditis all cases of sudden wild delirium or mania.

Mania in the course of myocardial disease is illustrated by the following case: W. M. R., a physician, aged about fifty years, was brought to my office in June, 1914, in a state of extreme shortness of breath and collapse, which had come on while he was cranking a refractory motor car. Examination showed total arrhythmia, an

enlarged heart, enlarged liver but no edema of the extremities. Under rest and digitalis the patient improved; the auricular fibrillation, however, was very slow in subsiding. Although he never regained his full strength, he was able to do a little practice until the spring of 1915; then, despite treatment, he began to lose compensation rapidly. At the beginning of June he suddenly started one day to "act like a crazy man," as his wife expressed it. For six consecutive hours he raced around his library table, throwing his hands wildly about and exclaiming: "I am a thief; no I am not. You are a thief; no you are not. I am a liar; no I am not. You are a liar; no you are not." These phrases he repeated over and over without stopping as fast as he could talk for six solid hours. It was only after Dr. H. MacVeigh Brown, with whom I was seeing him, had given three large hypodermic injections of morphin that the man quieted down. For nearly a week, however, he remained in a state of great physical agitation. He talked incessantly, mostly in a facetious vein, but without much coherence. Throughout that time he slept neither night nor day. It was a marvel to all of us how his heart stood the strain. Toward the end of this period another strange thing happened—the urine, which had been very scanty, became greatly augmented, the dropsy disappeared, and the man was able to lie down flat, which he had not done for a long time. He never regained his mind completely and died in stupor six days after the termination of the maniacal episode.

5. **Delusional States.** When delusions occur they usually take a persecutory form and render the patient most unhappy. While mania and mental confusion are not confined to any particular type of heart disease, I have seen delusions of persecution so far only in connection with lesions of the aortic valve. One of the cases was that of a young baker in my wards at the Philadelphia General Hospital, who had aortic stenosis of rheumatic origin. He thought he was being poisoned with gas by enemies in his shop. Under rest the delusion disappeared in a short time.

6. During attacks of Cheyne-Stokes breathing—a common symptom in cardiac disease—there is at times in the dyspneic period a state of mental excitement or delirium which subsides during the apneic period. The seizures of Adams-Stokes disease, which so closely resemble petit-mal, should also be mentioned here.

In considering *the causes of the cardiogenic psychoses* a number of possibilities suggest themselves:

1. The connection may be an accidental one. In an individual of psychopathic make-up the taint may at any time break forth quite independently of the existence of heart disease, although the latter would favor it by impairing the circulation. In asylums for the insane, cases in which the psychopathy is associated with disease of the heart are numerous. These chronic psychiatric cases do not, however, belong here, as this paper concerns itself only with acute manifestations.

2. A probable factor, in some cases at least, is disease of the kidneys, a frequent concomitant of disorders of the circulation. Uremia by itself is quite capable of producing psychoses, either of the maniacal or of the melancholic type. However, I do not believe that the passive congestion of the kidneys in decompensation of the heart, although often considered a true nephritis, is capable of producing a uremic state. As an accessory factor, it cannot be ignored.

3. I have sometimes thought that acidosis may play a part in the production of mental symptoms in cardiac disease. One often finds when the circulation is failing that the urine becomes intensely acid and throws down a heavy pinkish sediment of urates. This is such a constant phenomenon that I look upon it as possessing diagnostic value. It occurs in secondary renal congestion; not in primary nephritis. A study of the subject of acidosis in diseases of the circulation—the blood carbon dioxide, the hydrogen ion concentration, the ketones and other acid bodies—may, in the future, yield valuable information.

4. That drugs and poisons may be a factor is a natural assumption. An amount of alcohol that in otherwise healthy persons might not do any recognizable harm, may in a patient with disordered circulation lead to a psychosis. Some older writers have held digitalis responsible for maniacal and other acute psychopathic outbreaks. Durozier⁵ reported a number of cases of delirium and coma, which he attributed to digitalis medication. H. O. Hall⁶ also called attention to delirium and hallucinations during the course of the administration of digitalis. In one case cited by him (p. 490), it would certainly seem as if digitalis had been responsible for a condition of mental depression bordering on melancholia. Babcock (quoted by Hall) noted in two patients a peculiar mental and emotional state that disappeared after the use of digitalis was discontinued. In the one case, that of a woman, with mitral stenosis, the mental disturbance took the form of a sullen moroseness with taciturnity; while the other patient, a man with aortic insufficiency, manifested a mild delirium of a harmless kind.

At the present moment I have under observation a woman with auricular fibrillation, who, after about the third or fourth day, became confused and talkative. She did not seem to know where she was, although on the occasion of my visits she would answer questions rationally. She herself said, both to the nurse and to me, that she thought the dark medicine did not agree with her. The dark medicine was tincture of digitalis, with a very small amount of tincture of belladonna. I thought that she might have a prejudice, so I substituted digipuratum for the tincture of digitalis. But she also objects to that, and I am strongly inclined to stop the administration of digitalis altogether.⁷

⁵ *Gaz. hebdom.*, 1874, xi, 780.

⁶ *Am. Med.*, 1901, i, 598; *Ibid.*, 1905, ix, p. 489.

⁷ This was done but the psychosis continued, so that it is not likely that digitalis had anything to do with it.

While digitalis may in rare instances exert a direct action upon the brain, it is possible that in some cases when overdoses are given, it may, by disturbing the cardiac rhythm through its action on the conducting mechanism, still further impair an already inadequate circulation. On the whole, however, considering the universal use of the drug and the carelessness in dosage, one would expect that if digitalis could cause psychoses they would be much more frequent.

5. Several years ago I had the following experience: Mr. H. B. B., a man in the late fifties, was suffering with cardiovascular disease, with extreme dropsy. I tried digitalis and all other well-known diuretics without result. About that time agurin appeared on the market. I prescribed it and was amazed to find the urine output increased to an enormous degree, with a coincident rapid disappearance of serous effusions and of every trace of dropsy. During the time that the patient was putting out huge quantities of urine (in one day more than 200 ounces), he developed a delirious, incoherent state, which lasted several days and proved most distressing to his devoted family. I attributed it to a swamping of the system with the toxic material that had been held in solution in the dropsical fluid, and which, in order to reach the kidneys, had to return to the general circulation.

6. In cases in which the foregoing factors are lacking, in which the cardiac patient without neuropathic taint, nephritis, acidosis or exogenous intoxication, develops an acute psychosis, we may assume that it is due to some direct disturbance of the cerebral circulation, affecting the higher centers. At times there is probably syphilitic disease of the vessels, but that is not a prerequisite. Dana's hypothesis⁸ concerning the part played by the neuronic synapses may help us to understand why, in disturbances of the circulation, alterations may occur in the psyche. Nevertheless, it is still a far cry from hypofunction of the synapses to an understanding of mental exaltation or depression, of hallucinations or of confusional states.

Not much need be said about treatment, which will vary with the type of disturbance found. Maniacal patients often do not respond to morphin or any of its congeners. I have obtained better results with chloral, which I believe to be not so depressive to the heart as it is usually considered.

As regards diagnosis, it is always necessary to bear in mind that acute mania or melancholia may be symptomatic of visceral disease, in particular, of disease of the heart, and that patients so affected are not of necessity subjects for the asylum. The prognosis is governed by the state of the circulation—if the patient's heart holds out his psychosis will disappear.

⁸ Jour. Am. Med. Assn., April 24, 1920.