Salden Heines Talcott
Mental Disease

Extrait du livre

Mental Disease
de Salden Heines Talcott
Éditeur : B. Jain

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LECTURE VII

DEMENTIA

We shall today discuss that form of insanity known as Dementia. The term is derived from two Latin words, *de*, "from", and *mens*, "mind". The expression, therefore, means strictly "out of mind". It signifies, indeed, that the human being, thus bereft, is, to a considerable extent, in a state of the most deplorable mental poverty.

In discussing such a subject, we enter a field that is a vast desert waste. The paths across this field are strewn with the wrecks of early hopes, of joyous prospects, and of fruitless designs. The desert before us is a tiresome plain, unpeopled save by the ghostly images of uncertain recollection. Desolation is the ruling god of this desert, and destruction of mentality is his desperate and continued aim. And yet, in every desert there are some bright spots where, nourished by some hidden fountain, the perennial verdure springs. These gardens in the midst of the sand are called oases, and they signify that which is wonderful, and excellent, and unexpected. In the desert of dementia we have discovered some bright and hopeful spots. We have seen the light of recovery flash Unexpectedly across the dark and gloomy pathway of- some apparently hopeless victim. There are more oases in the distance awaiting attention, and Science, ever progressive, bears aloft her brilliant torch, lighting the path to future discoveries, and future amelioration of disease.

Esquirol states that dementia deprives men of the faculty of adequately perceiving objects, of seeing their relations to various things, of comparing them, or of preserving a complete recollection of thero; whence results the impossi-

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bility of reasoning correctly. Demented persons are incapable of reasoning because external objects make too feeble an impression upon them, because the organs of transmission have lost a part or all of their energy, or the brain itself has no longer sufficient strength to receive and retain the impression thus transmitted to it. Hence it necessarily results that the sensations are feeble, obscure and incomplete. Being unable to form a just and true idea of objects, these persons cannot compare them, or exercise abstraction or association of ideas. They are not capable of sufficiently strong attention; the organ of thought has not energy enough; it has been deprived of that vigor which is necessary for the integrity of its functions. Hence the most incongruous ideas succeed each other; they follow without order and without connection. It seems as if unreal expressions were whispered to them by unseen tongues, and these expressions are repeated by the patients in obedience to some involuntary or automatic impulse. Here we find examples of unconscious cerebration of a rare and interesting type, or rather a consciousness evolved from within and unrelated to association with external things, except through the medium of former impressions.

One great point of difference between dementia and idiocy and imbecility is that in both the latter the faculties are imperfect, while in the former they are simply enfeebled. Idiocy is a congenital absence of both cerebral and mental power. It is *amentia*, "without mind". Imbecility means a checked or arrested development. A child may have fair or moderate mental powers until the age of six, eight, ten or more years. Through disease or emotional disaster or injury, a shock is produced upon the nervous system, and this shock is sufficient to check all future mental growth. Hence an imbecile who is forty years of age

will have the mind and capacity of a child of six or tet years of age. In fact, if a child becomes an imbecile at ten he will by and by only manifest the feeble powers of a child three or four years of age. That is, from the time the imbecility fairly begins there is a tendency toward degeneration. Still, there are some imbeciles who retain a special faculty for remembering names, or for adding up figures, or for playing upon some musical instruments. Now dementia, meaning "out of mind", is a condition of mental failure or infirmity, resulting after the mental powers have been developed or ripened to a fair extent. Dr. Winslow describes dementia as "a general enfeeblement of the intellect, and in some cases an apparent abolition of all mental powers". Mental power is always weakened in dementia, but comparatively seldom is that power utterly lost. We are speaking now of confirmed cases.

Dementia may be classified in a general way as primary and secondary. Primary dementia is a disease which comes on independently of any other form of insanity. Secondary dementia follows in the wake of some other form of insanity, chiefly melancholia or mania; and if this condition continues until the case is hopeless, it is then called terminal dementia.

Dementia may be either acute or chronic. That is, it may come on suddenly and with sharp manifestations, or it may gradually develop into a hopeless and long continued aberration.

Primary dementia may be sudden or gradual in its onset. Among the young and the poorly nourished, an attack of dementia is likely to be sudden, and then it is called acute primary dementia. Senile dementia (the dementia of old age) may be primary. That is, it may come on without any previous attack of any form of insanity, or it may come

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on so gradually that when actually observed and brought to the notice of the physician it is, to all intents and pur poses, a chronic disease.

To primary and secondary dementias, with either acute or chronic tendencies, we may add, as special forms of this disease, masturbatic dementia, syphilitic dementia, epileptic dementia, organic dementia, alcoholic dementia, k.uatonic dementia, and senile dementia.

CAUSES AND SYMPTOMS OF ACUTE DEMENTIA

I now desire to call your attention to acute dementia, a form not common, but nevertheless interesting, because it affords under proper care strong hopes of recovery. It is to be distinguished from melancholia with stupor. The diagnostic differences were pointed out in my lecture on melancholia.

From the writings of J. Crichton Browne, as well as from our own observations, we learn that acute dementia attacks both sexes, but females in a larger proportion, though perhaps in a milder degree than males. It is essentially a disease of youth, being rarely seen in patients thirty years of ngi-, and it seems, indeed, to be often dependent upon exhausting influences operating at a period of rapid growth. Children whose powers are overtaxed at a time when the process of development is going on. and when nutrition has not onh to repair tissue waste, but is also obliged to contribute to the formation of new morphological elements, often fall into a state resembling idiocy, in which thev are dull, sullen and depressed. And the children who are thus affected by-acute dementia are not always those who have displayed extreme quickness of intellect, coupled \virh nervous instability, who have been clever and fragile, or who have inherited a predisposition to insanity. On the contrary, they are often

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318 pages, broché

publication 2013

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