

Interesting Features of Medicine

By George Thomas Palmer, M. D.

X—Imagination as a Cause and Cure of Disease.

PHYSICIANS have so far recognized the part which imagination plays as an etiological factor among patients that they have given to diseases of imaginative origin a distinct name. Imagined or fancied disease is known as hypochondriasis, and there are doubtless many conditions treated as real which should come under this class. Hypochondriasis must not be confused with malingering, which is a purely voluntary feigning of disease, for in the former there is certainly a very real disease element which forces the belief in the malady upon the patient. If the condition complained of is not genuine, there is certainly a functional disease of the brain.

There has always been a great deal of humor in the anecdotes of medical students reading over their first texts on medicine and developing the symptoms of the diseases of which they read. This is not the invention of the wit, but is experienced by many a sen-



Dr. Gibier.

(Prominent follower of the Pasteur method of inoculation for rabies.)

able young man. This tendency is the means by which patent medicine vendors hook their prey. They issue "family doctor books" outlining the symptoms of serious diseases. "Do you suffer from a sense of weariness?" they ask. "Do you awaken with an unpleasant taste in your mouth? Do your feet and hands go to sleep? Are your eyes ever puffy in the morning? Have you been guilty of any moral indiscretions in past years?" "Yes, yes!" the victim cries. Then he reads, "If so, the course lies toward the madhouse, an early death, diseased mind! Your only salvation lies in Quacker's Quaker Quassia; price, \$3; sent in sealed wrapper."

It may seem trite to introduce this instance in detail, but it is one of the most striking examples of the effect of imagination. The one who reads the advertisement realizes that he has had these symptoms (every living man has), and he concludes that he has that disease. He is entirely convinced of it and buys a bottle of the patent medicine. Seeing as months go by that the results are not so black as predicted, he does not lose faith in the patent medicine almanac, but acquires great faith in the nostrum and writes a testimonial, with all sincerity, telling of his wonderful cure. That this is not exaggerated more than one honest patent medicine maker can testify.

It is well known among physicians that a clean wound made by the surgeon's knife does not cause pain lasting after the operation. This is shown from the fact that many patients rendered unconscious by accident which make amputations necessary are unconscious of the fact that the operation has taken place after regaining consciousness. However, as soon as they realize what has happened they often complain of intense pain. Here is where imagination has the upper hand. The use of a hypodermic injection of plain water under the pretext of its being morphine will often cause immediate relief. Here is an example of a case in which imagination cures.

Just where real disease begins and imagination ends is a very difficult matter to determine and one which calls into play all of the tact and ingenuity of the physician, for a hint at imagination as the foundation of the patient's ailment is always resented. There are cases, however, known as chronic invalidism, beginning with some real disease of a chronic nature. At last a cure may be effected, but the patient has become an invalid by habit and continues to feel so long after every trace of disease has disappeared. He feels every pain of which he is accustomed to complain as truly as though it really existed. For such a condition imagination is the great and best remedy, and what is the doctor who in such cases treats the mind rather than the body. These are the cases upon which the various faith cures thrive, and faith cure is the proper therapy.

Cases are reported of those who

have long been crippled being carried to a man like Dowle. He, laying on his hand, orders the patient to arise and walk, with the result of immediate cure. These are the ones who have at one time been really crippled and have recovered, but have gone through life imagining that they were still helpless. It is the faith in the alleged power of the charlatan which prompts the effort which discloses the fact that power is regained.

Imagination as a cure of disease has necessarily been considered in a way in another chapter, but imagination is used outside the ranks of the fakirs. It is a potent element in the treatment of regular physicians. It is the power of imagination which produces results with those inert medicinal preparations known as placebos. A successful country doctor told me that he had three kinds of placebo tablets, pink, white and blue, all simply made of sugar of milk and utterly inert. He had been giving a patient the white tablets until the patient complained that the medicine given was not strong enough. Expressing his disapproval of such powerful drugs, the physician produced a blue pill and gave it with a great deal of ceremony. The result was immediate and gratifying in the extreme, although, as I have said, the white and blue tablets were equally inert.

There are a great many cases coming under the doctor's care in which he would prefer to give no medicine at all, either because there is no disease justifying it or because the disease is self limiting and tends to spontaneous cure. It is a fact generally recognized that in most cases drugs must be given to act upon the imagination of the patient, and for this purpose it makes practically no difference what it is so long as it does no harm.

Some time ago in a surgical clinic I saw a demonstration of the power of imagination which was interesting. A woman had been placed upon the table preparatory to an operation without anesthesia. The operator instructed her to compose herself. "It will be over in a moment," he said. With this he drew his finger nail over the location for incision. The woman uttered a scream and was fairly convulsed with pain. She could not be convinced that the incision had not been made until she was permitted to see the spot. She had suffered all the pain of the operation when nothing had been done to cause the slightest discomfort. This same patient had applied for operation to have a needle removed from her thigh, in which it had been accidentally lodged some weeks before and which, she claimed, caused her great inconvenience. A slight skin incision was made by the operator and immediately sewed up. The needle was not found, and yet the recovery was complete.

So it may be seen that there is a great deal in the idea of mind over matter. It is evidenced every day in general practice. The physician who has the entire confidence of the patient is always able to accomplish more than the man in whom the patient does not have so much faith, and the great specialist who is credited with the accomplishment of wonders is capable of doing as much by the mental impression he makes upon the patient as by his drugs.

The real indications for the use of electricity are exceedingly small. The real cures which can be accomplished by it are few, and yet in those cases in which imagination is an element there is nothing so potent. The very fact that there is always a degree of mystery about the workings of electricity, the fact that we have never learned exactly what it is, adds to its curative power when acting upon the mind.

It may be safely said that all of those conditions which can be caused by emotions or abnormal mental action—by pleasure, sorrow, worry or surprise—may also be caused by the action of the imagination, and influences which will act upon and produce these same emotions are the best means of cure.

Upon good authority we hear of some great surprise or joy opening the



Pasteur's Method of Inoculation For Rabies.

eyes of the blind, of some alarm or fear giving strength to crippled limbs, to great emotion ending an apparently hopeless disease.

Can it be that such emotions have joggled the lagging brain cells into action again, or must we accept it as the mental impetus which overcomes the imaginative disease?

The hypochondriacal conditions which are products of imagination or mental wandering and which are increasing with the high mental strain of modern civilization must be met by mental suggestion, which is the director of the imagination into channels which are normal rather than pathological.

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