

New York County Medical Association.

Stated Meeting, December 21, 1891.

THE PRESIDENT, S. B. W. McLEOD, M. D., IN THE CHAIR.

(From the New York Medical Record January 25.)

THE NON-CONTAGIOUSNESS OF LEPROSY.—Dr. L. Duncan Bulkley read a paper with this title. Up to fifty years ago, at least, one presenting a paper on the subject of the non-contagiousness of leprosy would have had no listeners, so widespread was the belief in the contagiousness of the disease. Even to-day, among many people the presence of a patient with leprosy would excite more fear of contagion than a case of diphtheria. This view seemed to prevail not alone among the laity, but to some extent also among physicians. It was the author's purpose to present such facts as had come under his observation bearing on the subject of the contagiousness or non-contagiousness of leprosy.

To account for the widespread belief in the contagiousness of the disease he referred to the biblical statements concerning it, its wide diffusion throughout the world, and failure heretofore to account for the spread of the disease in any other manner.

First, with regard to the biblical accounts, he said that no conclusions could be based regarding the contagiousness of leprosy thereon, for it was certain that at least five or six different types of cutaneous affections were included under this term, some of which were highly contagious and others were not. Nor could more reliance be placed on the statements contained in early literature. Further, with regard to its widespread diffusion, it might be said that malaria was quite as widespread, and yet was not contagious; the same was true of cancer, sarcoma, etc. It might be stated without hesitation that the spread of leprosy did not in any part of the world correspond in manner with the spread of any of the contagious diseases; where the disease was not endemic it showed no special tendency to spread. For instance, English observers were positive that not a single case of communication of the disease had ever taken place there. In our own country leprosy was not very uncommon; every hospital in this State probably had had one or more cases under treatment; he had personally seen several; the diseased parts had been freely handled by both physicians and inmates of the hospitals, yet in no case could it be asserted that contagion had arisen. Evidence of this character of the non-contagiousness of leprosy could be obtained in all parts of the world.

Regarding the well-known case of Father Damien, he quoted the opinion of Dr. Rigg, of Trinidad, now chairman of the English commission to investigate the subject of leprosy in India, to the effect that, to his mind, the contagious origin of the disease in this case was far from conclusive. He may have imbibed the leprosy germ in water, food, or air. A sister had lived in the same leprosy colony since 1858, and was still active and in good health. Dr. Rigg himself had never come across a case due to contagion.

It was true that cases had been reported here and there where persons were said to have contracted leprosy by contagion, but so far as the author had been able to ascertain, they were not supported by direct facts. One case had been reported in which an attempt had been made to inoculate the person with leprosy, and it was said to have proven successful, but later it had been found that this person had a cousin and an uncle afflicted with leprosy, so that heredity may have played the part.

The absence of any satisfactory explanation for the spread of the disease except by contagion, had also favored the theory that it was transferred from one person to another. But it might be remarked that not many years ago scurvy was considered contagious, owing to its rapid spread among all on board a vessel. But now this disease was known to be due to absence of vegetable food. Trichinosis was also once supposed to be contagious, but at present was well known to be due to a parasite.

The author here referred to the germ theory, and stated that the bacillus of leprosy had been found in patients in all parts of the world. Where it had apparently been absent there probably had been some failure in the technique. Race, climate, soil, had apparently no relation to the disease. Hygiene seemed also unable to account for its causation in the first place. Heredity was at one time supposed to be the general way in which the disease arose, yet the number of instances where children born of leprosy parents had escaped was very considerable.

Coming to the question of diet; it would seem, as Jonathan Hutchinson had shown, that only one article of food was used the world over,

namely, fish. The argument which this well known author had advanced in favor of the fish theory was very strong. Leprosy appeared in all parts of the world indifferently, yet the largest number of cases were to be seen on the islands of the ocean and along the seacoast. Further, it was believed to exist more among that class of people who ate their fish nearly raw, in a partly decomposed state, or preserved. It was not impossible, too, that bacteriology would prove the development of the germ of leprosy in the flesh of fish under certain conditions. The author thought, at any rate, that this offered a more satisfactory explanation of the development of the disease than the theory of contagion. While, of course, it was not impossible for the disease, if it were due to a germ, to rise by contagion, yet the degree of contagiousness must be extremely small, and could not apply in certain instances which had come under his observation. He had seen two or more patients in whom leprosy had developed in this country, and who had never come in contact with any other leprosy person. He also mentioned, as a not unlikely source in a few instances, vaccination. In the case of Father Damien, he thought the probable source of the infection was through mosquito bites.

His conclusions were: 1, that there was no warrant for the popular theory that leprosy was a contagious disease; 2, the disease was not contagious in the ordinary acceptance of the term, or as that word was applied to small-pox, syphilis, etc.; 3, it was probably due to the presence of a bacillus; 4, there were strong reasons to suspect that this bacillus might be introduced into the system by way of food, especially fish; 5, there was evidence that the disease might under favorable conditions be transferred from one person to another; 6, heredity probably accounted for a share of the cases; 7, there was no necessity for segregation; 8, there was far more reason for placing restrictions about patients with syphilis and tuberculosis than about those suffering from leprosy.

The paper was discussed by Drs. Conn, Fernandez, and L. L. Scamman, who in general seemed to agree with the author.

Exit Pendulum.

A couple of Eastern scientists, who have been trying their hands at inventing and experimenting, are said to have discovered a perfect substitute for the pendulum, now such a necessary attachment to clocks and all other large timepieces. The new invention, or discovery, consists of a hydraulic escapement, itself a piston or plunger that is propelled upward or downward once every twenty-four hours through a cylinder filled with mercury. This unique timepiece is perfectly noiseless. It stands on the mantle as quietly and as unobtrusively as the statue of Shakespeare or the Chinese vase, the only sound that escapes from it being from the bell at the time when it strikes the hours. Those who ought to know say that the invention perfectly supplants the discovery of the great Galileo. The head man of a great clock-making establishment, who has carefully examined it, says that it is destined to revolutionize clock-making, being so perfect and inexpensive.

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There is some fears that Horner's "suicidal" Banking Bill will pass the Legislature. To prevent this, all should get a Bill from the Hawaiian News Company, study it, and show up its weak points to all you meet.

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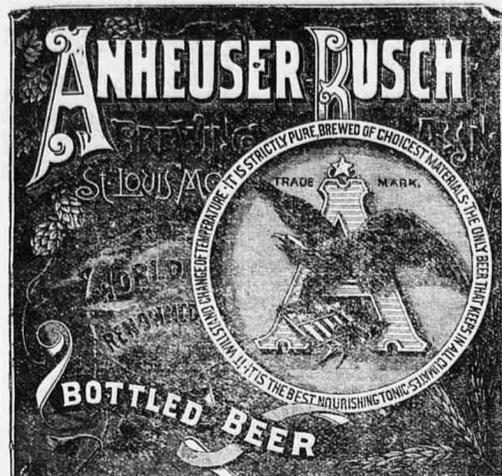
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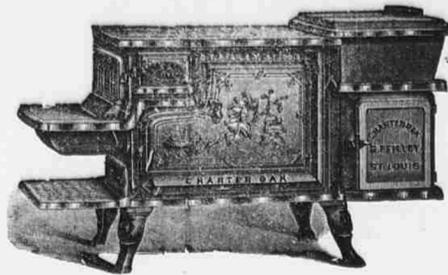
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