

INSANITY AND DEATH FROM MASTURBATION.

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THE records of lunatic hospitals, and the multiplication of books on the subject of masturbation, have probably, within a few years, been a means of inducing physicians to attach more importance than formerly to this habit as a cause of ill health; and have thus led to a more correct diagnosis and successful treatment of some of the worst forms of human disease. Evidence is not wanting, either from hospital or private practice, to show that the evil is wide spread and constantly in action. This cause of disease is sometimes overlooked by medical men, either from false notions of delicacy, or from ignorance, or from a selfish fear that suggestions on the subject will be heard with displeasure or repelled with indignation. The medical attendant in such cases treats the patient symptomatically, while the morbid cause continues in action, sapping the very foundations of health and strength, and death ere long closes the scene. As a general thing, the mass of community yet remain profoundly ignorant on this subject; and are ready to attribute diseases from this habit to any but their true cause. Within ten years a number of fatal cases have fallen under my observation, where death was clearly traceable to that cause alone. In each of these cases the friends and neighbors assigned "disappointed love" as the "*fons et origo mali*." The reasons for this kind of misjudgment are, probably, the restrained silence of scientific men on the subject, and the deceptions of garrulous empirics; who, themselves ignorant of the laws of physiology, depend for

patronage on the ignorance and superstitious whims of their employers. A general diffusion of the principles of physiology, or even a knowledge of the most important *laws* which the Creator has made to govern the temple of our living bodies, would create a dearth of empirics, and bring starvation upon many a money-getting juggler in medicine.

The most important and interesting case of masturbation which for several years has come under my observation, is the following:—

W—— J——, æt. 23, of sanguino-bilious temperament, had enjoyed good health through childhood and youth. From 14 to 16 years of age, he evinced a relish for books and a desire for intellectual pursuits. At 19 he left his father's farm, and engaged as a merchant's clerk in a neighboring village. At this time he was lively, cheerful, and fond of female society. In this employment he continued, except occasional absences at school, for nearly three years. Towards the latter part of this period, as I am informed by those who were then familiar with him, he became rather dilatory in business, languid in his movements, and began to show a dulness of perception, an aversion to the female sex, a desire for solitude, and a bashful timidity of countenance. In December, 1839, he became jaundiced and dyspeptic, with some febrile symptoms. He took cathartics for several days in succession, and afterwards cathartics and tonics, which relieved all his more prominent symptoms. For the next six or eight months he worked some on his father's farm, and for a while in the summer followed the business of peddling. In August, 1840, while peddling in Vermont, he was suddenly seized with a fit, which from accounts was probably of an epileptic character, although he never afterwards had another. From that time he manifested symptoms of insanity.

On his return home, some time in September, I was immediately sent for, and found him in the following condition. His physical appearance generally bespoke suffering and anxiety, or rather despondency—his flesh had very much wasted—his countenance was of a leaden sickly hue—the skin was generally dry and rough; occasionally, however, on the slightest excitement the blood would freely inject the capillaries, and soon after a warm, unctuous and offensive sweat would bedew the surface. His gait was unsteady and tottering—the muscular system greatly debilitated, and the motions tremulous and uncertain. He was very shy and taciturn in his appearance; answered questions very reluctantly, and his mind seemed totally incapable of fixing itself upon any subject even for a few minutes. He was generally sleepless, and sometimes highly delirious during the night. His breath was fetid, tongue and mouth white and pasty. The pulse was small, hard and frequent, but without the momentum and sharpness which indicate organic disease. The chest gave healthy sounds, and upon thorough examination I was satisfied that no viscus was seriously affected.

I was at no loss to ascribe *all the symptoms* to the habit of masturbation. On requesting a private interview, I drew from the unfortunate young man a full confession, which completely confirmed my diagnosis. "For six years," said he, "I have practised the habit. My propensity has grown stronger and stronger, and resistance has become an impossible

thing." He also acknowledged that for the last three months the pollutions had been involuntary. This was the first moment in his life that he had thought of harm or danger in the indulgence! While conversing with him, he seemed convinced of the cause of his ill health, and expressed, with a sort of despairing madness, his resolution to "go and sin no more." In view of the imbecile and delirious state of his mind, I expressed to his father my opinion of the cause of his sickness, and advised his immediate removal to the lunatic hospital. This opinion and advice was rejected by the father, although corroborated by several medical gentlemen who saw the patient, and more positively confirmed by confessions from his ruined son. My professional attendance, of course, soon ceased; and from that time to his death, a period of five months, he took the "cure alls" of empirics of every grade. The root doctor, the Thomsonian, and the fourpenny fortune-teller, each in turn tried his magic skill; and not one of them, either from ignorance or from selfish reasons, ever alluded to the true but hidden cause of all the symptoms.

As a matter of course, the state of the patient became worse and worse. The stomach rejected its contents, the bowels became obstinately constipated, and the body wasted to the most extreme degree of atrophy. His mind became a complete wreck—a part of the time furiously mad, then groaning with despair or tortured with wild and idiotic lunacy. He complained of no pain, except an obtuse compressive feeling in the left hypochondrium. For the last two months of his life his mind seemed unceasingly fixed upon that spot as the seat of all his trouble. He would implore every one that he saw to cut him open and "fix something that was wrong"—and from morning to night he would toss himself upon the floor or the bed, wringing his skeleton hands in anguish, shrieking and groaning with a sepulchral voice, because no one would "operate on him." In short, a more deplorable, loathsome or ghastly specimen of human suffering could not well be imagined. For a short time before dissolution, he became rather calm, and reason seemed partially to regain her seat, as if to witness the dying struggle of the victim, and, perchance, to reproach her possessor for the ignoble sacrifice of manly strength and youthful vigor to a debasing and suicidal habit.

The post-mortem appearances, as witnessed by Drs. Barr, Stone, Haynes, Gibson and myself, were the following:—

The body was covered with numerous dark-purple spots, and presented the most extreme degree of emaciation, both of the muscular and adipose tissues. The heart and lungs were healthy, excepting perhaps a slight degree of atrophy. The liver not changed in appearance. Gall bladder largely distended with very dark viscid bile. The spleen healthy. The mucous membrane of the stomach inflamed and very much thickened, especially towards the pyloric orifice. The mucous membrane of the intestinal tube inflamed and very much thickened throughout nearly its whole extent, while the muscular coats were much atrophied and in some places completely wanting. The pelvic and abdominal muscles were atrophied, black and softened. The psoas muscles in particular, on being removed, had no elasticity, but would break

under the fingers like flesh that is semi-putrid or has been a long time macerated in water. The kidneys and bladder nearly natural. The vesicula seminales were greatly enlarged, and each contained about a tea-spoonful of pus. The testicles were very much atrophied, white, and almost entirely destitute of any moisture. The bodies of the two lower dorsal vertebræ were partially carious, with about an ounce of pus lying upon their anterior surfaces. The brain, much to our regret, owing to unavoidable circumstances, could not be examined. The medical gentlemen present were unanimous in the opinion that *masturbation* had been the cause of all the symptoms and pathological appearances.

There is a great reluctance on the part of our profession to "speak the whole truth" on this disgusting subject. Does not this silence cherish the ignorance and weak prejudices of the community, and thus indirectly afford encouragement and patronage to boasting empirics and unprincipled medical pretenders. Shall we shut our mouths from candidly, and in a proper manner, speaking the truth to our patients, for fear of offending the pride of families? Shall we indeed, for selfish reasons, compromise the lives of our patients at the shrine of popular prejudice? Can we discharge our whole duty as laborers for the best good of suffering humanity, while we thus pocket the key of knowledge, and suffer the community to remain ignorant of this destroying Moloch of civilized society? Our profession, as a general thing, have nobly come forward and denounced intemperance as one of our greatest individual and national evils. The symptoms and morbid anatomy of intemperance are well known and easily understood. People do not have to wait for the disclosures of the dissecting knife to learn whether this or that man died a drunkard. The bloated form, the staggering gait, the palsied limbs, the blood-shot eyes, the nose embossed with carbuncles, speak a language that needs no interpretation. But not so plain are the symptoms of the evil in question. It is insidious, but certain in its operation. Its course is silent and solitary, but mighty and ruthless are its movements. It steals unseen and almost unfelt, but blights and destroys like the breath of the sirocco. The manly frame totters and decays beneath its undermining power, while the social, moral and intellectual man is wrecked or annihilated in the ruin!

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