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THE PREVALENCE OF MASTURBATION, AND ITS INFLUENCE ON HEALTH.

For the N. H. Journal of Medicine.

I have long wished to learn the results of the observations of other members of the profession on the subjects named at the head of this article, and perhaps I can in no way arrive at those results so surely as by offering a few of the fruits of my own experience in that regard.

The fact that many unprincipled quacks, in the cities and elsewhere, are fattening upon the fears of those who have unfortunately become victims to the folly of self-pollution, is no good reason why we should remain inattentive or silent upon a matter of this vast importance; and I am at times led to fear that many persons are at last driven to apply for aid to those who style themselves "advertising physicians," only because their medical advisers either have not suspected the cause of the applicant's illness, or through false delicacy have neglected speaking out plainly, and given the cautions and warnings the case demanded.

That the habit of self-pollution is, unhappily, very prevalent, must be obvious to all who have given the least attention to the subject, and that it cannot be indulged in without great detriment to health, must be admitted by all; yet how seldom do we find it even alluded to by contributors to our medical periodicals, or is it treated of in the more formidable *books* upon diseases and their causes.

When a lad of not more than ten or twelve years of age, I knew two boys, older by some years than myself, who were at great pains in *teaching* the practice to others, and both of them, ere they were twenty years of age, died of what their physicians styled the *liver complaint*; and several others among my mates at school, who had adopted the practice at their suggestion, suffered during the time I knew them from general ill health, no doubt in-

duced by the habit. Probably I should not have then observed these facts had they not been carefully presented to my notice by my father. During my attendance at the school I still observed that of those who were said to suffer from too close application to their studies, many of them at least were guilty of this vice, and I then thought it, and not their studiousness, the source of their pale cheeks and unsteady nerves, as well as of the *dyspepsia* from which so many students *then* suffered.

While in the office of my preceptor, several young friends returned from their first quarter's attendance at a noted academy, with their health so impaired that their parents were in doubt if it would be proper for them again to resume their studies, but I gave to one a copy of "Graham's Lectures to Young Men," which he and his mates read, who then told me that it was *not* over-application to their books which had injured them. They abandoned this habit, which had fastened itself upon them all, and with its abandonment they recovered their health and resumed their attendance at the academy.

I had not long been in the practice of medicine before I was fully confirmed in the opinion that I had not previously learned a moiety of the fearful truth, as *then* I could with propriety make enquiries and learn the facts that I had before found some difficulty in obtaining; and by my freedom in explaining the *cause* to those who were afflicted with derangements of the system thus produced, I obtained the confidence and learned the private history of many who had carefully guarded their secret from the knowledge of their nearest friends.

By reading the reports of those who have the care of convicts in prisons, and of the insane in the asylums, I have become more and more confirmed in the opinion that this habit is fearfully common and terribly destructive to the health of the people, but more especially the youth of our land, and particularly those of them who are congregated in the schools and the colleges.

To avoid unduly prolonging this paper, I shall not adduce all the evidence in support of the opinion advanced, or make lengthy extracts from the reports alluded to above, but confine myself to simply one or two paragraphs contained in the "Eighth Annual Report of the State Lunatic Asylum of the State of New-York." Dr. Benedict says:

"Masturbation, as a very fruitful cause of insanity, deserves especial attention. Fifty-five cases, admitted during the past year, *we attribute to this cause, and we believe this to be less than the actual number!* Many of these cases had been addicted to this horrid vice from their youth and even childhood, by which their mental and physical strength was insidiously debilitated, and insanity slowly induced.

"In addition to those fifty-five whose insanity is attributed to this cause, five others were admitted during the year, insane from other causes, and forty-seven of those remaining in the institution at the close of last year, were addicted to this vice, making one hundred and seven masturbators out of eight hundred and sixteen cases! The practice is often freely confessed

and vigorously resisted. One patient, in his zeal to conquer the habit, subjected himself to severe torture. Another performed upon himself a painful surgical operation. In the male sex the habit is not difficult of detection; in the female it is more successfully concealed. The shy, timid, down-cast countenance, combined with a debilitated physique, with relaxed tissues and varicose veins, arouse our suspicions. In some females the effect is the development of the cellular and adipose tissues, and gay and voluptuous manners; and in others debility and emaciation."

Dr. Woodward also made frequent allusion to this vice in his reports, and I think published a little manual for popular reading, to stay the plague in its destructive progress.

Dr. Benedict's remark that this habit is sometimes practiced from childhood, brings to my mind that in two instances I have noticed the *nurse* trying to produce excitation of the genitals in children under three years of age, and, in repeated instances, boys so young as to wear frocks and skirts have I seen busily engaged in the same manner. In one family, at one time, I saw three boys, the eldest not more than seven, all thus engaged, and when I mentioned it to their father, he said he also had frequently observed them thus employed, and he thought it an indication of a promise of *great manhood*, and worthy of encouragement; yet he was by no means deficient in common sense or common intelligence. Others, with whom I have conversed on this subject, have expressed similar opinions, and were, apparently at least, *willing* that the sexual desire should be stimulated and encouraged in their children previous to adolescence. And others again, who understood and regretted the evil influence of the unnatural passion, have said that *they* could do nothing to stay its progress, and have begged me to enlighten and admonish their children.

To indicate how little is known by some, at least, of the profession, I will refer to a few of the many cases that have fallen under my observation:

In 1845, I was called to a neighboring town to see Mr. —, who had been several years out of health, so much so as to be unable to attend to his business or perform any active labor, and had then become so far reduced that neither his friends or himself had any expectation that he would continue to live more than a few weeks at the farthest. He was very much emaciated, sallow, stooping and tottering in his gait, and although not over thirty-two years of age, he had the look of a man of sixty. He had been under the care of several physicians, two of whom are justly celebrated for their professional attainments. He had been treated for derangement of the liver and spleen, for dyspepsia, and spinal irritation and inflammation, and rheumatism, as well as sciatica; and was now being medicated for consumption; both the physician and family supposing him sure to die of a pulmonary affection.

When I first saw the patient, he was in his armed chair, and wore a loose wrapper with no under-clothing but his shirt, as he told me the friction of

drawers or pantaloons had frequently produced seminal emissions, and he had endeavored to avoid a repetition by wearing only a loose dress. His nerves were so easily excited that he avoided seeing or meeting his nearest friends and neighbors, and a visit from a physician he dreaded beyond his power of expressing. His own family passed into his room as seldom as possible, and with the noiselessness of a cat, yet the jar of the floor or of the furniture would sometimes cause almost intolerable anguish.

He had lost all hope, and all desire to live, and only wished to be allowed to pass undisturbed to the long-wished-for grave. In short, the physical and mental powers were nearly destroyed, and the animal propensity had completely obtained the mastery over him.

I gradually and, with great caution approached the subject, and after once overcoming his timidity and reserve, he gave me as complete a history of himself as his debilitated condition would allow. Before I left him, I had succeeded in inspiring him with a small amount of hope and confidence that he might again be restored to usefulness and happiness.

I saw him afterwards three times, at intervals of about a week between each visit, and then he had so far recovered that I continued the treatment by correspondence, and after the space of about four months I saw him at his work, so far recovered that he could ride about and see to his farm, and then nearly free from seminal weakness.

Not long since, I wrote him and I received a letter in reply, a part of which I transcribe, as giving a concise history up to the present time. He wrote:—

“As to the habit I now know by the name of masturbation, it was one I formed whilst very young. I can recollect it as far back as from ten to twelve years of age, and one I obtained by associating with boys of *my age* and older; those, too, of respectable parents, particularly those of our beloved minister, one who is remembered with love and respect wherever he goes. Little were they aware, I think, of the facts of the case at the time, or the future bearings upon their family; and little were we boys aware of the consequences or tendencies following.

I will not attempt to speak farther for others, but for myself I will say that the habit followed me until I arrived nearly to the age of twenty-eight years, varying, however, somewhat in frequency. I cannot now describe its various effects upon my system; I was usually able to be in business, but found I was not able to perform very hard labor, was not aware of the cause, thought sometimes it might not be right, but thought after all there was no great harm in it.

When I was near twenty-eight years of age, I was married. I then found myself laboring under a morbid inclination, I think as the result of the former habit, the indulgence in which, and involuntary evacuations, in process of time brought me where you found me.

Soon after I was married I made application to a physician, was told I

had the *liver complaint*, commenced taking blue pill, bloodroot, &c. Then I had an attack of the *sciatica*; finally, they said I had got the *spinal complaint*;—cupped, blistered, dosed enough to have killed any living being, except man, till circumstances finally placed me under your treatment, the first which seemed to give me any relief.

There is one thing more I wish to name, that is, that I was reduced so low as to be obliged to occupy a bed alone, and of course to abstain from sexual intercourse entirely, which I did for nearly two years, and to this I attribute, as the great cause, my recovery. I do not think, however, that this without the change in my medical treatment, or without appropriate medical treatment, as low as I was, would ever have restored me; neither do I think that all the medical treatment in the world would have restored me without that. But I do think if I had done that when I first applied to a physician, if I had *then* been advised to that, and persevered in it, I should have never needed but very little medicine. There are some more things I could tell to you if I could see you, but I cannot well write them.

If what I have written will be of any service to the suffering, it will amply repay me, and afford me satisfaction in the thought that I have been instrumental in doing something to alleviate suffering."

Of the above letter I have omitted some portions of a private nature, but nothing essential to this matter. This writer has uttered the common sentiment of all who have suffered from this pernicious habit;—namely, a wish that others may be warned of similar errors.

Last year, in July, I was called in consultation, to see a young man of eighteen or nineteen years of age, who had for near two weeks been confined to his bed with what his physician styled a *nervous typhus fever*. He had been bled and purged, as well as salivated freely, and had taken several emetics, yet the fever and the delirium continued, as well as the pain and heat in the back part of the head, and in the loins, which had been a prominent symptom from the first. The patient was very restless and irritable, and, what was particularly noticeable, would frequently demand to be left entirely alone. From the last as well as the former symptoms I was led to suspect masturbation as the cause of his illness, and was not long in obtaining proof of the correctness of the suspicion. I then stated the fact, and explained its tendency to the mother of the young man, and engaged her coöperation in endeavoring to overcome the evil. However, in spite of her vigilance, and that of his father, he would frequently indulge his passions, and it was only by keeping some one *constantly* by him, and watching him, that he was so far controlled as in a degree to recover his health. *This day* I have seen him, and he says he has been unable to labor any this summer, and his present medical attendant warns him that he is soon to die of *consumption*. His suffused and downcast eye, and wandering, embarrassed appearance when the condition of his health is alluded to, points to a source far from the lungs as the *origin* of his present ill health.

In December last I was called in the evening to see a young man of about the same age as the former, who had that day, while in school, been taken with a pain in the head, that led him to leave the school-room for his home. On his arrival at home he complained of great pain in the occipital region, and through the back and loins, accompanied with great prostration of strength. A physician had been called to him, who bled the patient and had administered a cathartic. The arm continued to bleed until evening, when he became comatose, with cold extremities and a slight frothing at the mouth. At this period, the aforementioned physician being absent from town, I was called to see him. I found him with such a rigid, spasmodic condition of the muscles of the throat, that I could not cause him to swallow anything, and was obliged to resort to injections. By using those of a stimulating nature, and by applying croton oil to the rectum, aided by external applications, I soon roused him so that he drank freely of ginger tea, and was soon bathed in a free perspiration, and his bowels were thoroughly evacuated, and ere morning he felt quite comfortable, when I again resigned him to his former physician.

From some motions of his hands while he was deranged, as well as from the seat of the cephalic pain, and an inspection of the genital organs, I became convinced that self-pollution was the cause of these difficulties, and imparted my views to the physician and to the man in whose family the young man resided. I also learned that during the previous summer he had been noticed to have a strange, shy and wild look, and that he could not be induced to converse with the female members of the family in which he resided, but would ever shun their presence. It had required much persuasion to induce him to commence attending the district school, which he had done a few days previous to this illness, and since he had attended the school he had been still more shy and wild in his looks than usual, and had demanded to sleep in a room by himself. My views were ridiculed as being totally unfounded, by the physician, who said he would be well after a few days if he could subdue the *fever*. In four or five days from the morning on which I left him, he was in his grave; and from two of his most intimate associates I learned facts that more than confirmed my suspicions; for he had told them that to sit in the room with the female scholars produced a degree of sexual excitement beyond his control.

In April last I was consulted by a man in regard to the health of his son, who had been failing in health for the two past years, and no one had given a satisfactory cause for this derangement of his health, or made prescriptions that had benefitted him. On seeing the young man, I made a bottle of syrup, and placing in his hand a copy of "Graham's Lecture," I desired him to call again in a few days. He did so, and told me he was *then* fully satisfied in regard to the origin of his difficulties, and would cooperate for their removal. Now he is able to do considerable work, and seems in a fair way of becoming a strong and healthy man. At his second visit, he mentioned

a school-mate of his who was then confined to his bed, and had been for weeks for *sciatic rheumatism*, as his physician styled the disease, for which he had been blistered and bled until his recovery appeared more than doubtful. At my request he visited the young man, who then declined being further treated for his rheumatic complaints, but refrained from longer indulging in self-pollution, and soon the pain and lameness in his hips disappeared and he gradually regained his health. I might fill pages with reports of similar cases, when the friends and the medical attendant had apparently no suspicion of the true cause of the derangement of health when produced by masturbation, but with the remark that during the four past years there has been no week in which I have not had patients under treatment for this habit, I will dismiss this part of the subject.

It is hardly necessary to dwell upon the influence of this habit on the health of its victims, after what has previously been said, yet there is one point that well deserves a little more attention.

The frequency of lumbar pains and of sciatic neuralgia, both in the male and the female youth, have emphatically pointed to a *common* origin; and that origin, I know, in many instances, to have been the indulgence of this habit; for as the habit was discontinued, the pain was no longer felt, and when I have addressed my enquiries to this point, as I almost invariably do of late, I have been told that a cramp, or a *stitch*, as it is called, in the back or in the hip or thigh, not unfrequently accompanies the act, and at times the pain thus produced has been so severe as to preclude the continuance of the indulgence for days.

Besides the local difficulty here noted, there are many nervous pains induced by the same habit, and patients are able to trace the effect as an immediate result of the act. The whole mental and physical powers are severely taxed in the consummation of the act, nearly every muscle and nerve being put more or less upon the stretch, and the relaxation of the entire system at its consummation, and the attendant fatigue and lassitude both of mind and body, attest in language not to be mistaken that the effort, the labor, cannot often be repeated and endured with impunity.

In regard to *treatment* I shall say but little, as it must be apparent that each individual case must be managed according to its own features and peculiarities. As tonics are indicated in most instances, as well as nervines, I have been in the habit of giving the *ferris ferrocyanas* in powder, both for the tonic of the metal and the anodyne properties of the acid, and on account of their happy combination I have come to value this preparation over all others of a similar nature. With this I am accustomed to combine the *lupulin*, and if there be any inflammation of the mucous lining of the bladder or the urethra, (and this state of the parts is seldom wanting,) I also add *cubeba pulv.* A powder composed of the above, with a little Turkey rhubarb, if there be costiveness of the bowels, will generally ensure a quiet night's rest, especially if the patient is careful to take a free sponging of the

entire body and limbs with *cold* water previous to retiring to his couch. Of course I prohibit the use of feather beds, and an *entire, absolute* abstinence from indulgence in the habit, or in sexual intercourse. This, with such modifications, and such general treatment as the individual case may demand, will ultimately insure a recovery, except in those cases where the long indulgence has so far prostrated the energy and action of the system, that there can be no hope.

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PREMATURE DISCHARGE OF THE LIQUOR AMNII.

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Mrs. H., pregnant with her second child about fourteen weeks after conception, was attacked with hæmorrhage from the uterus, which continued more or less for about three weeks, when it suddenly became so profuse as to alarm her and her friends, in consequence of which I was called to see her. On my arrival I found she was flooding considerably with intermitting pains resembling those of the incipient stages of labor. I resolved at once to check the hæmorrhage, and, if possible, to prevent abortion, which I knew must soon follow if the symptoms were not promptly met. The appropriate remedies were administered, which soon arrested the hæmorrhage and relieved the pains, and with prudent management my patient experienced no further inconvenience, with the exception of a slight return of the hæmorrhage occasionally for a short time, which entirely disappeared as the patient regained her health and strength. This she continued to enjoy until, according to her calculation she was seven months and a half advanced in the pregnant state, when, as she was walking across the room, without any pain previously or at the time, the membranes broke and a quantity of water was discharged. I was summoned in haste to attend her, and on my arrival, about an hour and a half after the accident, I found her entirely free from pain, though much alarmed at what had happened to her. A few words, however, from me soon removed her apprehensions of danger, and she became composed and slept well through the night, the waters continually dripping from the vagina, and this continued more or less for several days. I remained with her only a short time, when I left her without prescribing any thing for her except a purgative, which her costive situation demanded. She was up about sixteen days from this time, (her habits and manner of living being the same as usual,) when I was called to her again about ten o'clock at night. I found her in labor, her pains being slow but strong. These gradually increased in force and frequency until about four o'clock in the morn-