

ON THE PHYSICAL DIAGNOSIS OF SPURIOUS PREGNANCY.

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[After touching upon Auscultation, which is merely a negative sign, and Percussion which is of much value in many cases, especially in discrimination of cases of mere tympanitis, the author passes on to tactile examination, and observes, that there is in many of these cases a firm unyielding swelling of the abdomen, which might be supposed to be due to enlargement of a gravid uterus, but is in reality due to a tympanitic condition of the bowels, combined with a peculiar tonic condition of the abdominal muscles, which are so firm and tense, as to render it utterly impossible to make out the size and contour of the uterus.]

Chloroform will generally solve the difficulty completely, if only given deeply enough. When the patient is fairly put to sleep with chloroform the tense abdominal muscles become perfectly relaxed, and on pressing on the abdomen, you will find that the walls will give way before your hand, and sink backwards till you can feel the spinal column quite distinctly, and you then find the uterus to be of normal size. The phenomena presented by that phantom, tumefaction of the abdomen, while the patient is being anæsthetised are very singular. When the patient lies down on her back, and the abdomen is uncovered, it is seen to be projecting, swollen, rounded, and defined, like the abdomen of a pregnant woman; but generally, as I have said, with an appearance of unusual constriction around the lower edge of the ribs. No change occurs during the first stage of the administration of the anæsthetic, and until the period of excitement has passed over, the swelling continues, and the muscles remain rigid and tense as at first; but gradually as that stage passes off, and the respiration offers to become sonorous, the muscles begin to be drawn in, and the abdomen slowly flattens, until it assumes its proper size, or even becomes depressed and relaxed, like the abdomen after delivery. So long as the patient remains in a deeply anæsthetic state, you can make the most complete and satisfactory examination of the state of

the uterus, and, indeed, of all the abdominal organs; and you may have recourse to this expedient with perfect safety and success in doubtful cases of real pregnancy also. But when she comes out of her sleep again, in a case of spurious pregnancy, the muscles begin to arch up and to become tense as before, so that by the time the patient is fully awake the abdomen is as large and rounded as ever, and the necessary examination again becomes painful. For, as I have already hinted, the patient has sometimes in pseudocyesis a degree of tenderness in the abdomen that renders her very intolerant even of a slight amount of pressure. The patient having wakened up and found the apparent tumour still present, fails herself to be convinced of the fact that it had, for a time, been dispelled. But you may, perhaps, convince some of her friends of the absence of any real tumour, and their corroborative assertion may go far to bring her to a sound and proper belief afterwards. I had once a poor peasant's wife, from Berwickshire, with spurious pregnancy, who bothered all her friends, and kept them in a state of continued anxiety and trouble, because she was always going into labour, until she had arrived at a period which corresponded in her reckoning with the thirteenth month of utero-gestation. She was one of those persons whom it was utterly impossible to convince by any argument of the true nature of her affection; and her great confidence in the reality of her pregnancy had imposed on her friends, and led them for long to share in her kind of monomania,—for, after all, the mind is really in such a morbid state in some of these cases as to deserve the name of monomania. Having put her under the influence of chloroform, I called her sister into the room, and made her feel the spine through the collapsed abdominal walls, and succeeded thus in demonstrating to her entire satisfaction that there was no child in her sister's abdomen. But the patient waking up, and finding no change in her condition and form, might have remained unshaken in her belief, and, indeed, was still for stoutly affirming that she was pregnant, when her sister shut her up with, "Haud your tongue, woman! You've naething in your wame, for I felt your backbane myself with my ain hand!" I have no very satisfactory explanation to offer you of the nature of this very strange abdominal swelling, and of the peculiar phenomena observed in it, when the patient is in a state of anæsthesia. Some years ago I made a number of observations on some of our hospital patients, to try and solve the difficulty. Some medical friends who had been told of the remarkable effect of the chloroform were quite certain that the swelling must have been due to distension of the bowels with gas, which, they averred, must have escaped unobserved when the sphincter was relaxed during the deep sleep induced by the drug. But that this was not the proper explanation we easily proved by introducing a tube into the rectum, and putting the free end of it under water, and then finding that no bubble of air escaped during the anæsthetic subsidence of the swelling. I believe that the phenomenon most probably depends

on some affection of the diaphragm, which is thrown into a state of contraction, and pushes the bowels downwards into the abdominal cavity. I am the more convinced that this is the true explanation, from the fact that you can sometimes make the abdominal swelling disappear for a second or two, by getting the patient to take a deep inspiration, and then suddenly breathe out again. But, whatever be the explanation, the value of anæsthesia as an adjuvant in aiding and establishing a correct diagnosis of such cases cannot be over-rated.

[Before proceeding to the treatment of this disease, Dr. S. premises a few remarks as to its pathology. This is still involved in great obscurity. In the greater number of cases we find on local examination no trace of uterine or ovarian disease whatever; in some we find slight engorgement, a little displacement, or ulceration. Yet from the fact of nothing being discoverable in the other cases we must not regard these as essential causes, only as coincidences. So that, on the whole, the disease would seem to depend rather on some disturbance of the ordinary functions of the generative organs than on any organic disease. In the treatment of the affection our first anxiety must be to raise or restore the standard of health, which is generally impaired. Secondly, to counteract any existing uterine or ovarian disease; and, thirdly, to administer uterine and ovarian sedatives. In the bromide and iodide of potassium we have remedies likely to act as direct sedatives to the generative organs.]

I know that by the administration of these drugs, and particularly by the administration of the bromide of potassium, I have often succeeded in cutting short the disease, and in causing the train of symptoms to be suddenly broken down, after they had been in existence for a few months only, instead of allowing them to go on and annoy the patient till the completion of a period corresponding to the usual term of utero-gestation, or even for a greater length of time; and this striking effect of these remedies I am disposed to attribute to some specific sedative action exerted by them on the uterus and ovaries. And there are other facts known with regard to the use of these drugs, which go far to confirm the idea that they are possessed of such an action as I refer to. It is on this supposed action, for example, that Sir Charles Locock founds his recommendation of the bromide of potassium for the cure of epilepsy connected with menstruation. There is, as you are aware, a form of epilepsy which is liable to attack females, and more particularly young girls who have just reached the age of puberty, and who become subject to an attack of epilepsy immediately before, during, or after the recurrence of every menstrual period. The onset of the epileptic fits seems to be directly connected with some obscure kind of irritation set up at these periods in the organs of generation; and according to the experience of Sir C. Locock and others, this type of disease, which rarely

yields to any other mode of treatment, may sometimes be cured by the use of bromide of potassium, which probably acts by quieting the excitement of the uterus. From these, and such like observations as to the action of the bromide of potassium on the uterus, I was first led to try the effect of it in cases of spurious pregnancy; and from what I have seen of its efficacy in these cases, I can recommend you very strongly to have recourse to its administration. Give five or six grains of it three times a-day, either alone, or with the addition of from two to three grains of iodide of potassium, and I feel certain that you will often succeed in checking the progress of the morbid symptoms, and so in relieving your patient's mind of much anxiety, and in saving her much needless trouble and prolonged distress. The remedy, let me add, has this further recommendation, that it often proves a good tonic, so that its use is not contra-indicated by any constitutional debility on the part of the patient. The bromide of potassium, let me add, may also be applied locally to the uterus by having it made up in the form of a medicated pessary, and its action may then be aided or supplemented by the admixture of some other sedative, such as morphia or belladonna. Or you may employ other local sedatives. Thus I have sometimes attempted to allay uterine irritation in such cases, and more particularly where it was attended by, or amounted to, a certain degree of neuralgia, by the introduction of a stream of carbonic acid gas, or of that gas combined with the vapour of chloroform, into the vagina, in the manner I explained to you when treating of the palliative treatment of carcinoma of the cervix uteri. Sometimes, also, I have used leeches locally with a similar view. By the mere application in this way to the uterus of local sedatives you can never, perhaps, expect to produce such a powerful effect on that organ as will lead to the cure of the disease; but I believe you will often find them most useful adjuvants to the internal remedies.—*Med. Times and Gazette, Sept. 10 and 17, 1859, pp. 250, 278.*