A HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS AGO

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GENEROUS DIET IN THE TREATMENT OF NERVOUS DISEASES

BY G FIELDING BLANDFORD M.D. OXON, F.R.C.P.

THE UNAIDED EFFECTS OF FOOD may not have had the trial it deserves in the relief of nervous weakness. Patients are told to live well and adopt a generous diet, but this is usually judged by the amount of port wine or other alcoholic stimulant, rather than by bread, mutton or beef.

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If we inquire into the past history of nervous patients, we often find that for a considerable time the supply of food has been inadequate. A large increase in the quantity of food often lifts them out of their condition. I speak of people suffering from general neurosis, taking the form of an insanity of a low and depressed character, or hypochondriasis, hysteria, alcoholism, or neuralgia.

A hard-working man of business

Below is a common case. These are the persons who cannot go on without frequent holidays; they break down because they are insufficiently fed. A holiday, during which they live better, builds them up again for a time, again to break down.

A man somewhat past middle life, but whose years do not imply senile decay, becomes unfit for business, fidgety, irritable, depressed, or even melancholic to the extent of insanity. We hear that he was been a hard-working man of business, always nervous, and very probably an indifferent sleeper. Being most heavy for sleep in the morning, he has risen at the latest moment, and, snatching a mouthful of breakfast, has hurried off to catch the train or omnibus, worried and anxious lest he fail to reach his office at the hour appointed. At lunch-time, if he be really hard-worked, he takes, not a meal, but a sandwich or biscuit, eaten perhaps standing, and often bolted in so great a hurry that digestion is difficult; he tells us that he dare not take more of a meal in the middle of the day, for he would be rendered unfit for the remainder of his work. In the evening, with what appetite he may, he eats his dinner, perhaps not before half-past seven o'clock. Now, granting that his dinner is amply sufficient, such a man lives on one meal a day with very little besides.

Clergymen

Another class among whom we may frequently witness the same result and corresponding symptoms are the clergymen who for various reasons deny themselves an adequate amount of feed.

Either they fast rigidly, according to the rule and doctrine of the day, often allowing some hours to elapse before they break their fast, or they think that hearty eating is a snare and a carnal enjoyment, or they hold it sinful to eat their fill while others are in want.

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Whatever the cause, certain it is that many of the clergy break down in one or other of the forms of nervous disorder already enumerated, and an enlarged dietary is a necessity.

Melancholia

This low nervous depression, is the one that is most likely to run in a short time into serious and even fatal insanity. In almost every example of this variety, we find a marked disinclination to take food, and in extreme cases it can only be administered by some kind of forcible feeding. In milder cases, and at an early period, food will be taken if we insist upon it, and the result of a large supply is frequently manifested in a very brief time.

When we suddenly compel the ingestion of what may be called an enormous quantity of nourishment, the stomach by no means rejects it, but, on the contrary, retains and digests it, as is shown by the rapid amelioration which takes place.

From my own observation, and from the subsequent confession of patients, I am inclined to believe that the refusal of feed is in almost every case the result of delusion.

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If we see such sufferers at an early stage when forcible feeding is not necessary, and they will take that which is ordered, merely protesting against the uselessness or wickedness of the proceeding, we may prescribe a very large amount of feed without fear, nay with a confident expectation of the greatest benefit.

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