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Echoes of the Past.

CHOLERA IN THE ARMY IN INDIA OVER A HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

By Major W. W. S. Sharpe.
Royal Army Medical Corps.

As a sequel to the article by Major-General Sir W. H. Ogilvie, "Cholera in the Army in India nearly Fifty Years Ago," which appeared in the Journal in July, 1927, the following letter, written 112 years ago, may be of interest, especially the dosage and the last paragraphs dealing with the causation of the epidemic.

Major-General Ogilvie, in his article, mentioned that it had been stated in the old orders of fifty years ago that a lull occurred in an epidemic in the early part of the monsoon, and that it would be interesting if this could be proved or disproved.

Such a lull occurred in the outbreak amongst the civil population of the Ferozepore District in June to July, 1927, when the monsoon broke.

I am indebted to Major A. Villiers, Chief Ordnance Officer, Rangoon Arsenal, for this excerpt from Madras Army Orders, which he discovered whilst looking for records dealing with the history of his Corps.

1813. The Right Honourable the Governor in Council having received from The Most Noble The Governor-General, the printed copy of a letter from the Medical Officer in charge of the Native Field Hospital with the Centre Division of the Grand Army, relative to the treatment of the alarming epidemic which lately visited the Army, in its course through the provinces subject to the Presidency of Fort William; and His Excellency having expressed a wish for the speedy diffusion of this little Tract, as a means of averting much misery and distress:—The same is published for general information.

"My Dear Sir,—In compliance with your request to give you instructions for the treatment of the disease which prevails in Camp, from the circumstance of your being frequently detached from the Army without Medical assistance, I give you a Statement with much pleasure.

"The symptoms are as follows:—Violent vomiting and purging of watery matter, spasmodic cramp in the extremities extending to the
abdominal and muscles of the chest, a collapsed countenance, the pupil and the white of the eye covered with a thick film, a suffusion of blood and turgidity of their vessels, the eye at the length sinks into its socket and immediately becomes fixed. The extremities now become cold, and the pulse is not to be felt, and indeed the energy and action of the heart are considerably diminished.

"The first man I saw thus affected was treated with three grains of Calomel and a quarter of a grain of Opium every two hours with frequent draughts of Brandy and Water, and other stimulants, the man died and I opened him on the same evening.

"I found the stomach partly filled with muddy water the bowels were empty and considerably inflated with air, hardly any bile in the gall bladder, none in the biliary ducts, there was general inflammation of the bowels liver, stomach and lungs.

"There were indications to follow a directly opposite mode of treatment. Consequently, on assuming charge of the Native Hospital for the reception of Camp Followers, and Public Establishments, on the 16th of this month, one hundred and ten patients were admitted with the symptoms I have described.

"I immediately gave to each patient 15 grains of Calomel which I dropped on the tongue and washed it down with 60 drops of Laudanum and 20 drops of Peppermint in 2 ounces of water.

"Before I go further, it will be necessary to mention to you, that Laudanum in a large dose of 60 drops is not a stimulant but a sedative, whereas Laudanum from 15 drops to 20 & 30 is a stimulant, the former produces sound sleep, removes spasm and irritability, whilst the latter excites considerable uneasiness and convulsive startings.

"It will appear the more remarkable to you when I also mention that the variation of a dose of Calomel has the same effects.

"Calomel in a dose from 5, 8, to 10 grains excites lassitude, sickness, irritation of the bowels, and, on account of its being a stimulant, acts as a good purgative, but Calomel in a dose from 15 grains to 20 is a sedative, allays vomiting, removes spasm, sends the patient to sleep, and produces one or two motions.

"You will now observe on what principle I treated my patients, not on a plan of giving powerful stimulants, but on one which at once removes the irritability and spasm, composes the stomach and the bowels, produces sleep and tranquillity of the mind, excites the secretion of the liver, and prevents the progress of inflammation.

"On the second day it was indeed a consolatory sight to observe the wonderful change.

"The vomiting and purging had stopped, the spasms removed with general moisture on the skin, they had experienced sound sleep, and the pulse had returned to the wrist.

"I now gave 30 grains of Jalap which effected one or two bilious motions.
Of one hundred and ten men I only lost two, and those were decrepid aged
men, in whom the vital energies were at once extinguished, the remaining
one hundred and eight I had the good fortune to see all recover.

"In the treatment of Europeans, however, I should strongly recommend
copious bleeding, and never less than twenty grains of Calomel with 60 drops
of Laudanum and 20 drops of Peppermint in 2 ounces of water, and, on the
spasm attacking the abdomen, the application of a large blister.

"Should the blister fail in drawing and the blood not flow from the
veins, immersion in the warm bath will have the most beneficial effects.
Should the warm bath not be procurable, warm friction; and pots of warm
water thrown over the patient will produce an equally favourable result in
bringing about the re-action of the circulating system.

"When the purging and vomiting are incessant, as well as violent we
ought never to be alarmed in giving as far as 80 drops of Laudanum with
20 drops of Peppermint, and 20 grains of Calomel, and injecting 40 drops of
Laudanum in Conjee by Enema.

"A few hours determines the safety of the patient, therefore those few
hours must not be lost in an undetermined manner and by small and useless
doses.

"After the first shock is over, that is, after three or four hours, if
there's much spasm and irritability remaining, the dose of Calomel and
draught must be repeated, the patient will then fall into sound sleep and
awaken nearly recovered.

"The after treatment will only be to keep the bowels regularly open
with Calomel and Jalap, and to give occasionally 60 drops of Laudanum to
promote sleep. It is however to be remembered, that it would be an error
and do considerable harm to bleed in persons who are weak, worn down by
disease, and aged.

"The most urgent symptoms in this disease are violent thirst and
dreadful sensations of burning heat in the bowels and pit of the stomach;
the frequent and lamentable calls for cold water should never be satisfied,
for I observed many unfortunate Camp Followers who had died in the act of
drinking. I therefore gave warm Conjee, and by the means of Sentries
prevented any water being taken into the Hospital.

"Hiccup is not a dangerous symptom in this disease, for there was
hardly a patient recovered without suffering this spasmodic irritability.

"I am of opinion that unless a patient takes these remedies within 6
hours after the attack, the case is hopeless at least I only recovered ten
patients with the regular form of the disease after a greater lapse of time, and
in those the symptoms were peculiarly mild.

"It is of the greatest importance to bear in mind the necessity of
giving Calomel in powder instead of pills, for I have known many instances
where pills were passed through the patient in the same state and form
they were taken into the stomach. This point therefore is of such high
importance, that, in Fever, Dysentery, but above all, in this complaint, by
which a patient is carried off in 12, at farthest 30 hours after the attack, from which circumstance it becomes necessary to affect the system immediately, otherwise if this point should be over-looked the chief object in the operation of the Medicine may be frustrated and the patient lost.

"It is on this principle I recommend Laudanum in preference to Opium, one is directly active in its operation, but the other has to undergo the process of dissolving, or perhaps never dissolving passes through the system in the same state it was taken into the stomach without producing any effect whatever.

"I am so convinced of what I now assert and recommend that for these last three years I have never once used any Medicine in the form of pills. And I look back to the day when I first discovered this error in practice as one Great improvement in the treatment of acute diseases.

"Reading over the foregoing I find I have neglected to mention the use of peppermint in co-operation with Laudanum, the reason I prescribed it was, from its known good qualities in expelling air from inflated bowels and stomach, and I have always found it have that effect in the most desirable manner.

"That this disease is not infectious, I am perfectly convinced. All my attendants upon the sick have escaped the disease, and I have more particularly at all hours of the day and night respired the atmosphere of a crowded Hospital with impunity.

"But I fancy there have been a combination of causes, perhaps one of the principal was the sudden changes of atmospheric temperature, for I never knew the Thermometer vary so much as it has this season.

"In the morning at day break it stood at 52 and at one o'clock 96—a variation of 44 degrees in six hours and a half.

"I must beg leave however to decline at present entering into the causes; from recent investigation and circumstances it has put on more the appearance of being Epidemic, than it did on the commencement; but as I have leisure I trust I shall be able to correct any errors in this Letter, which is written during the pressure of other business.

Believe me, My dear Sir,

Yours Faithfully,


sd/ Frederick Corbyn.

Asst.-Surgeon i/c of the Native Hospital, Centre Division of the Army."