

ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTIONS.

ETIOLOGY AND TREATMENT OF THE PSYCHONEUROSES.*

By JAMES J. PUTNAM, M.D., Boston,
Professor of Neurology and Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School.

THE distressing maladies classified as "psychoneuroses" cause perhaps more misery than any other single group with which the community is afflicted. Not only is this true but the study of their etiology, their treatment and their prevention, on which you have honored me with an invitation to address you, has an importance far transcending the question of the comfort and happiness of those persons who come to physicians for advice. Without understanding the nature of nervous invalidism in the individual it is impossible to understand the true nature of many traits which count as normal, and of many great social problems which are constantly pressing themselves upon our notice.

There is an additional reason why so intelligent a body of men as those before me should think this subject worthy of being taken up afresh. As matters now stand some of the graver varieties of these psychoneuroses pass practically untreated, not because physicians fail to recognize them as serious but because they are thought too serious, too nearly incurable, to be fit subjects for time-absorbing treatment. I have in mind, as examples, two patients, of excellent intelligence and warm affections, who live practically exiled from their homes because they have the obsession that they shall kill some member of their families. I know how hard the successful treatment of such cases is, but I wish to say, with emphasis, that the method of treatment which I shall here mainly advocate holds out good hopes for sufferers of these sorts.

The next point for which I ask attention is with regard to the therapeutics of these affections. Have we reason to be satisfied with the means of treatment commonly employed? There is a tendency, even among neurologists, to answer this question substantially in the affirmative. It is widely felt that the various familiar measures,—such as seclusion in private and public sanatoriums, engrossing occupation, treatment by hydrotherapy, electricity, hygiene, rest, change, suggestion, persuasion and suitable drugs,—give us, when properly administered, all that we really need to supplement the healing powers of nature. This view I do not share. These modes of treatment are indeed of immense value. They should be cultivated and studied as frequently representing the best means at our command, and the fact

*Read at Canadian Medical Association, June, 1910.