

mercuriale, a moist dermatitis caused by the application of a mercurial preparation to the skin. Somewhat later this idea was expanded by Hebra, the elder, who stated that eczema was nothing more than a superficial inflammation of the skin, dependent on some external irritation. Hebra admitted that constitutional conditions might predispose to eczema, but maintained that local irritation was essential in the genesis of the disease. He even went so far as to include itch with the eczema inasmuch as it is caused by an external irritant.

Nowadays our views with regard to the part played by external irritants in the causation of eczema are quite different from those of Hebra. We no longer apply the name eczema to any dermatitis produced by chemical or mechanical irritants, but designate it, artificial dermatitis. This, however, is open to criticism, because in many cases of artificial dermatitis there is a predisposition, due probably to constitutional disturbance which renders the skin hypersensitive to irritation. For instance, in chocolate dippers only about one in ten suffer from an eczematoïd eruption of the hand, which shows that the predisposition to the dermatitis is of first-rate importance. On the other hand, an artificial dermatitis is generally localized to the seat of irritation, which shows that the local irritant is an important etiological agent. In eczema the lesions appear in parts not subjected to local irritation, which character is important in differential diagnosis between the two affections.

If we deny that an eczematoïd dermatitis produced by an external physical agent is an eczema then naturally one should also exclude similar eruptions caused by local irritation of animate agents. This, I may say, is the custom followed. For instance, some of the eruptions which are now described under the heading of seborrheic dermatitis were formerly classed with the eczemas. As soon, however, as the etiology, pathology and symptomatology of seborrheic dermatitis was understood the eruptions which were formerly classed with the eczemas were given their correct nosological position; and there is no doubt that as our knowledge of dermatology increases other eruptions which are now designated eczema will be separated as distinct entities. Eczema at the present should be looked upon as a composite affection. It would be more correct to speak of the eczema group or eczemas than eczema. With this conception of the term one might place in the eczema group any superficial inflammation of the skin, originating without visible external irritation and exhibiting in some stage of its evolution serious exudation.