

CONSTIPATION.*

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Mr. President and Gentlemen: Constipation is a subject with which we are all more or less familiar, and may be defined to be that condition in which there is a prolonged retention of the fæces, or in which they are habitually expelled with difficulty, or in insufficient quantity. While there are individual peculiarities due to habit or nature, the custom with most persons of having one movement in twenty-four hours would cause any longer retention of bowel contents to be considered constipation. There is no sharp line separating constipation from health. The habit of having one movement in each day is usually considered necessary for the continuance of good health, although both the number and the hours of evacuating are fixed to a great extent by education. The habit once established, the desire recurs at the same hour and entirely without any effort of the will. If the desire be resisted, as that moment may be urgent for some other direction of energy, it will not likely return until the same hour in the next day. By so much every time as this happens is the habit of defecation with ease lessened. Habits of life are as much formed by neglect as by practice. Children of both sexes, even at the present day, are not commonly taught that the most important hygienic duty of the day is to void the bowels. Men and women of the lower classes have no fixed rule of conduct in this respect. Habits come upon them—they do not seek to form them. It is only when we come to the really educated in any community that we find a due appreciation of the importance of a daily and copious defecation. Constipation is generally an acquired habit, and Shoemaker, of Philadelphia, says, "it is an inherited defect of civilization." He says: "This is readily seen if one goes from civilization to a life of mountains and woods, with plenty of mental and bodily employment, ravenous appetite and constant opportunity for immediate relief of the bowels. He will find that he will often have a natural passage twice in twenty-four hours instead of the single one which civilization has decreed as best for that space of time. There are not generally any re-

straining influences among the wilds. Time and place are propitious. Nature asserts herself without restraint and reverts to her ancient promptings and ways."

Constipation occurs most frequently in advanced life from the loss of peristaltic force, diminution of sensibility in lower bowel, general functional inactivity, with muscular degeneration and obesity. Infants are more subject to it than children over one year, especially those who have been brought up by hand. In those cases it is usually due to improper diet or unsuitable clothing, or both. Jacobi has drawn attention to the fact that in infants it is sometimes caused by a disproportionate length of the sigmoid flexure. If the infant is badly nourished the muscular contraction will soon begin to flag, and will be attended by actual weakness of the muscular walls, and in this condition the bowel is apt to be over-distended by the fæcal contents as the expulsive force is seriously impaired. A baby soon will know the suffering caused by a motion, and by its own efforts will delay relief. Very often, too, in infants the torpor of bowels is induced by some of the preparations of opium formerly so much in vogue, but happily going out of fashion to a certain extent.

Women are more prone to constipation than men. Avoidance of exercise, their habits of indoor life, ignorance of the necessity of regularity or wilful neglect, false modesty, which so often imposes restraint, together with their anatomical structure and physical life are the chief causes of this.

Habits of life and the occupation of the individual have much to do with the causation of constipation. Both persons of sedentary habits and overworked people are peculiarly subject to this trouble. Luxurious and enervating habits of life, bad ventilation, overheating of rooms, want of cleanliness, indigestible food, imperfect mastication, irregular meals, excessive tea-drinking, and tight-lacing all tend to bring it about. Neglect to establish a regular habit, as the continued contact of fæcal matter with the mucous membrane wears out its susceptibility, and over-distension enfeebles the muscular walls of the bowel; various diseases of the brain, lungs, heart, liver, and the disorders of the digestive system, abundant diaphoresis and diuresis, food

*Read before the Ontario Medical Association.