

IS ALCOHOL A STIMULANT?*

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Especially in practical therapeutics, the dead past has not buried its dead, and consequently many of its ghosts do duty as active forces in our treatment of to-day. Phlebotomy has only been partially laid to rest, and many other venerable absurdities pass muster. Among the latter I class the prevalent notion that alcohol is a stimulant. The theory of stimulation should be thoroughly discussed, for it lies at the very foundation of medical treatment. Purgation is another name for the stimulation of the function of the intestinal mucous membrane, and a similar remark would hold good regarding many expectorants, stomachics, diuretics, etc., and any misapprehension regarding their action must lead to error and bad practice.

A false theory regarding the action of medicine must lead to misapplication of it. One case may give the most encouraging results which the next may flatly contradict. In this manner we have gone on in the use of alcohol, with frequent announcements of infallible indications for its administration, with the result that, at the present time, there is no medicine regarding which such varying and directly antagonistic views are held by competent men. Whilst the majority of text-books repeat the old chestnut that it is a stimulant, we have in the old country such eminent men as Whitla, of Belfast; Henley, of Univ. Coll., London; and B. W. Richardson, in America; Davis, of Chicago; Palmer, of the University of Michigan, and many others, who boldly declare that we will never understand its action and never be able to use it to the best advantage as long as we cling to the stimulant theory. They teach that it is narcotic and sedative with an antiseptic action, and *that* in proportion to the quantity taken.

My purpose is to prove that alcohol is never a direct stimulant, but that it is narcotic and sedative in all doses. Advisedly I use the expression "direct stimulant," for any narcotic or sedative may act indirectly as a stimulant by quieting undue nervous excitement. In this manner chloroform and opium often increase the strength of labor pains; opium acts as a pur-

gative, and a glass of whisky steadies the hand of a nervous operator.

I am not attacking alcohol as a medicine, but simply the theory that it is a stimulant. I wish also to urge that, in common with other narcotics, it is a dangerous remedy to prescribe, especially in chronic cases. Indeed I have never been able to comprehend why we prescribe opium with so much and such proper caution, whilst we deal out alcohol, which does tenfold more harm, as if it were the most harmless drug in existence.

Our views about the meaning of the term "general stimulant" are somewhat hazy. So universally is the word "stimulants" applied to alcoholic liquids that a foreigner might easily imagine that we believed there was and could be no other form of stimulant; that even men who admit that alcoholic is narcotic and sedative still speak "giving stimulants."

The horse illustration probably conveys as clear an idea of the general application of the term as we can get. It teaches that as a whip calls forth the energy of the horse without putting any into him, so will alcohol call forth the latent vital force of the system without supplying anything to assist in its development. It teaches that as the horse would stick in the mud without the application of the whip, so would the machinery of the system stop before its force was exhausted but for the use of alcohol.

That nature could or would give up before all her force was exhausted is probably as absurd an idea as could be imagined, and yet that is the plain teaching of the illustration. Many ingenious theories have been proposed to account for such extraordinary teaching. One is that there is a reserve force in the system which nature would not put in the field unless forced to do so by so-called stimulants. We need not dwell upon this. Another says that the coarse alcohol atoms coming in contact with the fine brain cells explodes them and sets free their contained energy. As a theory this is very pretty; but as it implies that alcohol supplies no material for repair, it would seem very much like a "bull in a china shop." Moreover, this theory would not be consistent with any but a very short period of stimulation. As so-called stimulants are given to tide a

*A paper read before the Ontario Medical Association.