

THE CANADA LANCET :

A MONTHLY JOURNAL OF

MEDICAL AND SURGICAL SCIENCE.

Vol. VI. TORONTO, JANUARY, 1874. No. 5.

Original Communications.

A CASE OF LEAD POISONING.

BY WILLIAM C. CORSON, M.D., BRANTFORD.

(Physician to the Institution for the Blind.)

In presenting a case of lead poisoning, it is not claimed there is anything very extraordinary in its occurrence. We wish simply to remind our friends of the profession that cases of this kind are not necessarily confined to towns and cities, as is generally supposed, but that even in a thinly-settled rural district, as in the present instance, such an event may take place. The patient, of whom a brief account is here given, had been visited by other practitioners, none of whom professed to form a correct diagnosis. No blame can fairly be attached to these worthy and intelligent physicians. Happily cases of lead poisoning are not very frequent, even in the dense population of cities, and in country practice such an accident would rarely be suspected.

On the 23rd of January last, I was requested to see, in consultation, Mr. M., a farmer, aged 51, residing in the township of Harley. On entering the house, the number of neighbors and relations gathered there was evidence that the patient was considered in a most critical condition. His physician had spent the whole of the previous night with him, and had remained for my coming at noon. Upon examination, I found the patient with a normal temperature and a pulse rather slow and weak. His most prominent symptom, he informed me, was abdominal pain, for the relief of which fomentations were being applied, and morphia internally administered. There was no abdominal tenderness, and the pain was rather relieved than otherwise by firm pressure. The absence of any febrile movement in connection with other

symptoms, showed there was no inflammatory action. The pain was often paroxysmal, and at times very severe. His previous history, as given by himself, was, that for two years he had been failing in health and growing gradually weaker. Frequently he had been seized with a sensation of faintness and precordial uneasiness as of impending dissolution. Last autumn, his arms and hands, to use his own expression, began to feel "fagged and powerless." He had gradually lost his color, and at the time of my visit presented the sallow pallor of serious organic disease. There had also been vague wandering pains in his limbs, and his mental powers had failed considerably. His bowels had a tendency to constipation, which he strove constantly to overcome. This history, taken with his present symptoms, pointed it out as a case of colic, and colic depending upon the presence of lead in the system; and upon looking at his gums, there, as plain as a sign in the heavens, was the characteristic blue line of Burton; and the line was not blue either, or violet, but absolutely black and broad! The teeth were encrusted with tartar, which, by its combination with the lead, had produced the deep-colored line of the gums. The patient was given to understand the nature of his disease, and he was asked if he could explain how lead was received into his system. He could think of nothing, except that he had painted his own house two years previously. This seemed so plausible an explanation as to the source of lead, that the inquiry was pushed no farther. In talking the matter over, however, with his wife, and just as I was about to leave the house, he remembered *there was a lead pipe extending from the pump into the well of drinking water.* Here, then, was a solution of the mystery. This man had been for two years drinking water charged with a leaden salt, until his whole system was saturated with the metallic poison. It was then suggested that one of his daughters, lying ill in another room, might possibly be ailing from the same cause. A visit to her revealed the fact that she too, was suffering from the contamination of lead, though in a milder degree than her father. She had continued uneasy pains in the bowels, and the violet streak was quite distinct along the margin of the gums. Indeed it was noticed the whole family had not enjoyed good health for months previous, and the discovery of the cause was a most fortunate circumstance.