

THE WET SHEET IN SCARLATINA.

BY JOHN TAYLOR, M.R.C.S., L.S.A.

As the present high rate of mortality from epidemic scarlatina may justify practical suggestions prompted by experience, I feel it my duty to endeavour to excite the profession to a reconsideration of the remedial powers of the wet sheet as an auxiliary in promoting cutaneous elimination.

Though all agree as to the importance of promoting and sustaining cutaneous elimination in the prevention of cerebral, spinal, and other congestions, and, at a later stage, the disintegration of mucous membranes, dropsy, and glandular enlargements, yet this simple, powerful, and ready-at-hand auxiliary is unappreciated. Forty years' experience has assured me that this plain or medicated vapour-giving envelope affords the best *external* means for eliminating scarlatinal poison and preventing destructive sequelæ. It promptly suppresses pyrexial heat and itching; produces sleep, with a soft secretive skin, more or less continuously; and enables the digestive organs to accomplish that great desideratum in the treatment of scarlatina—viz., absorption of highly nutritious food. It may be repeated, on the recurrence of the febrile paroxysm, two, three, or four times in twenty-four hours, the patient remaining enveloped from half an hour to an hour. Mothers and nurses who have witnessed its efficacy are most earnest in its repetition. My plan of procedure is to immerse a nightgown, slit up at the front, in hot water (half a pint to a pint), pure, or medicated with a drachm or two drachms of tincture of capsicum, or in the infusion of three or four pods; or in mustard-water, the clear supernatant fluid from a tablespoonful of mustard to a pint of water; extending the gown over the feet by means of a towel immersed in the same fluid, both to be well wrung out and suddenly applied, and the patient quickly packed in two blankets previously placed on the adjoining sofa or bed; another blanket, or two pillows, or an eiderdown quilt covering all.

The medicated packing is preferable in the incipency, and at any other time to evoke the rash, and in cases of cerebral oppression, with pale skin, low pulse, and delirium. Last month I had a case of this type, in which the mustard packing was applied. It did not elicit the rash, but it cured the delirium raised an alarmingly depressed pulse, and restored the excretions. This effect was solely dependent on the medicated packing, as the patient, a girl of thirteen, could not swallow medicine or food, and enemata had not then been administered. With the aid of a tonic she made the best recovery of three in the same family, and had no sequelæ.

The auxiliary mode of treatment here defined is by no means intended to exclude the ordinary plan which every practitioner's experience has led him to select and rely upon; but I am of opinion that if packing is judiciously incorporated with such reliable treatment, it will be the means of saving many lives that would otherwise be lost, and of diminishing the severity and duration of the sequelæ.

I further believe that in other cases of blood-poisoning

the exhibition of medicaments cutaneously by vapour would in some degree neutralize the poison, aid its elimination, and, as in packing, soothe the whole nervous system. During a cholera epidemic in Liverpool I had part charge of a district where nearly all who first went into the hospital died. One woman, with cholera in the malignant form, was packed in a wet sheet with half a pound of mustard, and remained enclosed six hours, notwithstanding her imploring entreaties to be released. She drank copiously of iced water. The vomiting, purging, and cramps began to abate in two hours, and had ceased when she was unwrapped, presenting the ordinary lobster change from blue to red. Gastric fever, with great thirst, ensued for several days, when she recovered as a brand plucked from the burning.

Modern parliamentary mustard, deprived of capsicum and other adjuvantia which made it formerly a condiment so famous, would not have answered the purpose. Doubtless, *persevering cutaneous elimination* is a great medical power.

Not only as an eliminator may the wet medicated envelope be used, but as an antispasmodic in the relief of pain and irritation in any of the membranes, mucous, submucous, or serous; with the aid of chloral, morphia, conium, belladonna, nux vomica, &c., dissolved in the water, or sprinkled on any particular part of the wet sheet. It has the merit of antiquity from the ancient Romans, and among the farmers of Great Britain for the relief of colic and the inflammatory diseases of cattle. A sheet, wet with some herb decoction, or water sprinkled with turpentine, was thrown over the suffering animal, and enveloped by blankets, quilts, and overcoats, snatched from the beds on which "the rude forefathers of the hamlet slept." And, doubtless, many a pang was thus allayed and many a life preserved. Modern experience has witnessed the amazing relief procurable from the wet sheet, in its simple form, in pyrexial and glandular disorders, and from the medicated form in the zymotic and spasmodic affections. In stridulous croup, for instance, I have seen the mustard sheet act magically after other means more orthodox had failed. Its power is also potential in diphtheria simulating croup, and, in strong doses, in inflammatory croup, sometimes averting the impending tracheotomy knife.

The suggestion to use this auxiliary plan of treatment should not be slighted because of its antiquity or of its having been used empirically. Many blessings, moral and physical, have fallen into disuse, and require revivals to awaken a consciousness of their existence and utility; and this is one of them, lying neglected within our reach. Objection would be rational if the more primitive plan of enveloping the suffering man or beast within the skin of a newly killed animal were recommended; but when one so simple and close at hand, so easily adapted, so soothing, and so powerful as an auxiliary in the routine of medical treatment, is recommended, suffering humanity should have the benefit of it, especially where no self-interest prompts the recommendation—except the satisfaction of doing good by presenting the cup of cold water so typical of charity.—*Lancet*.