

In the physical history of woman there are three crises at which periods the strain upon the nervous system is exceptionally great, namely, puberty, the puerperal state, and the menopause. If the mental constitution be unstable in any way, there must necessarily be greater probability of a breakdown at one of these crises than in the intervals between them ; and in our everyday experience we find this to be the case, for mental disease is peculiarly liable to develop in woman at one of these periods.

There are two other mental alienations occurring during the function of reproduction, namely, those of pregnancy and lactation, but those are not strictly classed as puerperal insanity.

Technically speaking, puerperal insanity is the mental disease which occurs within the first six weeks after confinement ; most of the cases occur within the first two weeks, while a few may be seen to develop after the technical limit. One of the most scientific and experienced alienists of our age finds that five per cent. of all the cases of mental diseases among women belong to this form, and that one in every four hundred labors is followed by it.

*Causes.* As already stated, the constitutional mental instability forms the essential groundwork and prerequisite for this and other forms of mental aberration. Most mental constitutions are inherently so sturdy that insuperable mental strain or overpowering shock will kill the body before the mind will give way ; but all are not so constructed. In some persons there is, unfortunately, though nothing to their discredit, less power of resistance in their cerebral cells ; that is to say, there is a greater susceptibility to depressing influences, and accompanying, or independent of, this condition there may also be found a diminished facility for recuperation, or even lessened cell nutrition. It is easy to see how such a person, when subject to the unusual functional activity succeeding childbirth, or the shame of illegitimate motherhood, or the concurrent lessened supply of nutrition and defective assimilation, or imperfect metabolism—I say, it is easy to understand how a mental constitution at other times in good working order may be, by such causes, at least temporarily disturbed. Given, then, a mental constitution with inherent defective resistive power of the cerebral cells, and we shall find that all influences which attack and sap the stores of physical vitality will, in the puerperal state, operate towards the development of puerperal insanity.

This disease is twice as frequent when the children are born out of wedlock, because of the attending shame and humiliation, and also because of the insufficient care and nursing received by mothers in such circumstances. Shock, resulting upon the receipt of bad news, will sometimes usher in an attack ; want of care and proper food, and having to get out of bed too early, are often contributing causes. About one-third of