ORIGINAL COMMUNICATIONS.

IS SIMPLE ACUTE ERYsipelas A LOCAL OR A CONSTITUTIONAL DISEASE?

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In March 1853, I read a paper before the Midland Counties Branch of the Provincial Medical and Surgical Association at Nottingham, with the following queries.

1. Is simple acute erysipelas a purely local or a constitutional disease?
2. Is it sometimes a local, and sometimes a constitutional disease?
3. Is it simultaneously, both a local and a constitutional disease?

Not having had any answers to the above queries, I repeated them in this Journal on October 10th, 1864, with another query.

Why is erysipelas classed with the exanthemata?

What has been the experience of practitioners with regard to the application of the nitrate of silver?

IS ACUTE ERYsipelas A LOCAL OR A CONSTITUTIONAL DISEASE?

1. I have attended a number of cases of erysipelas on the face and elsewhere, at an early stage of the disease, where there have been no constitutional symptoms; in these, the disease has been directly arrested and subdued by the application of the nitrate of silver. If the erysipelas had been allowed to proceed without the local application, constitutional disturbance would have been the result.

2. If from exposure to wet, heat, cold, etc., a feverish attack takes place, and several days erysipelas inflammation supervenes, on a prompt application of the nitrate of silver, along with the usual remedies for the cold, the patient becomes convalescent in a few days; but if the local application be neglected, the inflammation runs its usual course, the constitutional symptoms become more aggravated, and the illness is much prolonged.

3. If the erysipelas and constitutional symptoms appear simultaneously, a prompt application of the nitrate of silver at an early stage of the complaint, and the use of active constitutional remedies, cut short the disease; the patient is soon convalescent; but if the local application has not been used, the disease runs its usual course, setting at defiance the most active constitutional treatment.

For many years past I have considered that simple acute erysipelas is a purely local disease, and ought not to be classed with the exanthemata, or constitutional diseases; and that the constitutional derangement alone arises from the local disturbance. I believe the application of the nitrate of silver in erysipelas fully attests it to be a local and not a constitutional disease, as it can be always arrested and subdued by its application.
Various reasons have deterred surgeons from using the nitrate of silver as an external application in erysipelas. One is, that it has been classed with the exanthemata, or as a constitutional disease; and it has been feared that the application would cause morbid terminations of the inflammation. But I have treated internal organs. I have never entertained such an opinion; nor have I seen a single instance in which the application had produced any untoward effects, during the more than forty years I have used it.

Mr. Nunnely, in his monograph On Erysipelas, in mentioning my treatment of the disease with the nitrate of silver, recommends "from eight to twelve grains of the nitrate of silver to one ounce of distilled water, or six or eight grains in the same quantity of rectified spirit," instead of the concentrated solution I have always used of one hundred and sixty grains of the nitrate of silver to one ounce of distilled water. The weak solution named by Mr. Nunnely is insufficient to arrest the disease, but quite sufficient to bring the remedy into discredit.

In the other case, a surgeon had severe erysipelas on the face and head, and was attended by several of his medical brethren. I was informed that the nitrate of silver had been applied; when I visited him he had violent delirium, causing him to become unmanageable. I observed that the nitrate of silver had been applied on one side of his face, allowing the inflammation to spread over the remainder of the face and the surrounding parts, producing some cerebral distress. By a proper and early application of the nitrate of silver, all the mischief would have been prevented.

An early obstacle to the general and free use of the nitrate of silver arose from the impression on the minds of surgeons that it is a caustic—a destructive agent. From the commencement of its application I found that this was not so, and many surgeons of the present day agree with me that it is a real preservative agent. I have never seen the cutis vera destroyed by it; indeed, it will not even raise a blister so effectually as cantharides.

For the successful application of the nitrate of silver, the ordinary brittle stick must be used, either in substance or in the concentrated solution; not "the lunar cautic points perfectly tough," nor any of the new preparations of the nitrate of silver, as the crystals and cake used for photographic purposes (Vide British Medical Journal, July 11th, 1863.) I have never used a weaker solution than one scruple of the nitrate of silver to one drachm of distilled water, or eight scruples to the ounce of water. In the specialized case, this solution has stopped the specific cause in its effects when applied on an inflamed skin; its progressive action continues during the first, the second, and the third days, and declines on the fourth, at which period the action of the nitrate of silver and the inflammation of the skin cease simultaneously.

In every case of external inflammation, I apply the nitrate of silver on the whole of the inflamed surface, and beyond it on the healthy skin to the extent of one or two inches, according to the severity of the inflammation. If the inflammation should progress beyond the boundary, it is usually weaker, and is easily subdued by a repetition of the application. I have never known an instance in which I had not full control over the inflammation in acute simple erysipelas.

From mature and long experience of the nature of erysipelas, I would apply the nitrate of silver on the first appearance of the inflammation, and not run the risk of eight or ten day delay. If the application was not even necessary, the only inconvenience would be a blackened skin for a few days, of no consequence compared with the injury which might be caused by the spreading of the inflammation. The well known quotation is very applicable—principia obsta.