A CASE
OF
COMPLETE RECOVERY
AFTER
NECROSIS OF THE BODY OF A
CERVICAL VERTEBRA.

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THE following short history appears to me worthy of record, if for no other reason, yet as showing what serious lesions this body of ours may undergo, and yet not only perfectly recover, but recover without any notable degree of suffering or pain :

J. S—, æt. 40, ex-policeman and chequetaker at a music hall, came to me in the out-patients' room on October 8th, 1869. He was a strong-built man, of florid complexion and healthy aspect, and said that he had never known what it was to have a day's illness till some few months back, when he began to feel a "dry soreness" at the back of his throat, which had since gradually increased, until at the time of his visit he experienced considerable difficulty in deglutition.

On looking into his mouth, which he could not easily open, I found the back parts of the cavity so swollen that it was impossible to see behind the velum. His breath had the most unutterably filthy odour. Introducing my finger I felt a hard substance at the back of the pharynx, which could be nothing but exposed bone. The throat was by no means sensitive, so that the man could submit without difficulty to such examination. There was a certain amount of thickening about the back of the neck, but no pain nor tenderness, excepting in a very slight degree when pressure was applied behind the ears.

The man had had a sore on the glans penis fourteen years previously ; and six years back had suffered from sores on the skin, and spots on other parts of the body. But no other syphilitic antecedents could be detected.

Notwithstanding my efforts to persuade this man to come into hospital he positively refused to do so, and laughed at representations to him of the serious nature of his malady, asserting that, except the difficulty in swallowing, he felt quite well, and able to do his work. He, therefore, continued out-patient, being warned against sudden movements of the head, and recommended to wear a stiff-stock, and to take large doses of iodide of potassium with ammonia and sarsaparilla.

Four days later the man came again to see me, and wished to be discharged, saying that he had recovered perfectly. With him he brought a large piece of foetid substance which had come from his throat in the following manner :—On returning home after his previous visit he had introduced his finger into his throat, and fidgeting the hard substance about had succeeded in at last loosening it a little. By a repetition of this the piece became at last so loose that he was able by a strong wrench to extract it altogether.

The substance when macerated was found to contain numerous small particles of bone, and one large piece, forming almost the entire body of a vertebra, which, as far as could be judged from the position of the hole, was the fourth cervical. The portion consisted of the whole length

of the vertebra, for at one end there was the impression of the cartilaginous disc, and at the other not only a piece of the disc itself but also a part of the next succeeding vertebra. In thickness the portion includes at least three quarters of the whole thickness of the body of the vertebra, and the exceedingly carious condition of the piece, especially on its dorsal aspect, can leave no doubt but that the entire body had come away.¹ The swelling at the back of the mouth and pharynx had now subsided, as also the difficulty in opening the mouth, and deglutition was again easy. I was thus able to get a view of the hole from which the piece had come, and found it full of a cheesy-yellow matter. There was no pain whatsoever, and it was with the greatest trouble that the man was persuaded to remain under observation even as out-patient.

During the next two months the man came frequently to see me, the stiffness and swelling in the neck, which had never been very great, gradually disappearing. The hole, however, in his throat still remained unhealed, and from time to time discharged purulent matter mixed with bits of bone "as large as rook-shot."

On December 3rd the man was attacked by pain in the shoulders, which had the good effect of frightening him so far, that I persuaded him at last to come into the hospital.

He was placed on his back on a sloping bed, his head being fixed by sandbags, and strict orders were given that for no purpose whatsoever should he stir from this horizontal position. His treatment, as before, consisted of large doses of iodide of potassium, with ammonia and sarsaparilla.

In this position he lay till June, that is, for six months, his general health remaining throughout good. The pains which had induced him to come in only lasted a few days and then disappeared altogether. While they remained they manifested distinct nocturnal exacerbations, which added to the strong probability that the cause of his condition was syphilitic. On one occasion during these six months (Jan. 8th, 1870) the man was nearly choked at night, but at last

¹ The piece of bone was exhibited to the Society. It is now in St. George's Hospital Museum.

expelled another largish piece of foetid substance, which, unfortunately, he neglected to keep for inspection. This left another hole in his throat, on the right of the older one, which had not yet healed, though becoming smaller. Such, at least, was the account given by himself, for I was unwilling to make any ocular examination of the throat, as this could have been of no practical utility, and would have been attended by much risk. The patient himself, however, introduced his finger and examined the condition of the holes with perfect indifference. He could put his finger into them "to hitch out a pill," as he said, or any particles of food which might lodge there, without the least pain or inconvenience.

On another occasion (Feb. 16th) he had, again, a fit of choking, and expelled two foetid pieces of substance, each about the size of an almond. These, when macerated, yielded several spicules of bone, and two thin coherent discs, which I take to be portions of fibro-cartilage, that had been exposed by the necrosis of the vertebral centrum. The rotten condition of these pieces after long maceration has destroyed all structure in them.¹

The only symptoms during all the time referable to the nervous system was an occasional slight numbness of the middle finger of the right hand.

When the man had thus passed six months, the holes in the throat were almost closed, and he became so fretful and impatient that it was impossible to keep him any longer in bed. After consulting, therefore, with Mr. Holmes, I had his head and shoulders confined in a stout leathern splint, which made the head almost immovable; and impressing on him as strongly as I could the great danger involved in any movement of it, sent him to the Convalescent Hospital at Wimbledon.

After a month spent there the holes were entirely healed, and the throat looked quite healthy, excepting that the soft palate had become in one place adherent to the back of the pharynx. There was a certain degree, not a considerable

¹ These were also exhibited. They are in St. George's Museum.

one, of thickening about the back of the neck, but no deformity of shape nor other sign whatsoever of what had occurred.

Soon after this the man quitted London altogether, and I have not since seen him. But fifteen months later (Nov. 1870) I received a letter from him, from which I quote the following account verbatim :

“I am pleased to inform you that I feel quite well in health, and that I never feel any pain in the head or the throat. I believe the wound in the throat is quite sound. I have had colds, but never felt the least soreness in the throat. My head is movable but not quite so free as before. I can move it best to the left. It is rather stiff to the right. I go to work on father’s farm, mowing, reaping, loading, and all heavy work with our labourers. So if the neck was not sound I should soon find it out. I also go out horseback and shooting, jumping over hedges, and have been in one running match ; blow my instrument, and nothing seems to hurt it. I have told you this to show you that I have gave it a fair trial. I never took a dose of medicine since I left the hospital.”

I need not waste the time of the Society by enlarging on the various points of interest in the foregoing case. They are sufficiently obvious of themselves. Neither is it worth while to discuss the question whether the origin of the mischief was or was not syphilitic? Though the man’s previous history, the absence of any other apparent cause, and the nocturnal exacerbations of pain at the time of admission into hospital, lead me strongly to suspect that such was in reality the starting point.

I will therefore merely recal to the memory of the Society, that in the 32nd volume of its ‘Transactions’ is an account by Mr. Wade of a case in which a syphilitic patient lost “the greater part of the anterior arch of the atlas, with the entire articulating surface from the odontoid process of the axis.” The ulcer was not healed in Mr. Wade’s patient at the time when the paper was read, and I do not know whether the man eventually recovered.

There is, however, in the museum of St. George's Hospital the material record of a similar case, in which perfect recovery ensued after the removal, by Mr. Keate, of the anterior portion of the atlas, including the facet for the odontoid process, and of a portion of the occipital bone from the border of the foramen magnum. This case is recorded in the 'Medical Gazette' for 1835 (vol. xvi), and the piece of the axis removed is pictured in a note by the editor to Mr. Wade's paper. The specimen itself I exhibit to the Society.

A cure is also recorded by Dr. Mackenzie in the 'Pathological Transactions' for 1869, in which recovery followed after what was believed to be a part of the transverse process of the second cervical vertebra had been expectorated.

Postscript, June, 1872.—Since this paper was read I have again seen the man. He appears in robust health. There is no visible sign whatsoever of the hole that existed at the back of the pharynx. On pressing the place with the finger, it seems that the hole is filled by some firm elastic substance, but not by hard bone. The man holds his head somewhat stiffly on his shoulders, but has a fair power of rotation. There is no deformity in the cervical region, and scarcely any sensible thickening.