

**OBSERVATIONS on the Diseases incident to certain
of the North American Indian Tribes ; in a letter to Profes-
sor DAVID HOSACK, from JOHN D. HUNTER.**

DEAR SIR,

In compliance with your request I now, after some delay, owing to my other engagements, communicate to you a few facts which have come within my observation, and which, to a person of your acquirements, I flatter myself will at least gratify your curiosity.

On coming from the wilderness to a populous city, where every art flourishes, and every facility abounds for the cultivation and diffusion of knowledge, and particularly where a medical school exists under circumstances so happily adapted to its objects, a superficial observer would very naturally conclude that those portions of mankind who enjoy no such privileges must, in this respect, labour under the greatest disadvantages. But for these privations this uncultivated state of society is compensated by an entire freedom from many diseases to which the civilized man is subjected ; and for those diseases to which the children of the forest are liable, nature has amply provided remedies, and experience has taught the skill to apply them.

The diseases of the Indians are, for the most part, simple, and may be relieved by simples. We find diarrhoea as frequently cured by a cold infusion of a bitter root, and as often by chewing astringent barks : the diseases of the stomach by alkalis and gentle laxatives, and the worst sore eyes by washing them in the juice of the yellow root largely diluted. The Indians are in general subject to few febrile diseases : those of the intermitting order are most frequent among them, particularly of the tertian form. Those inhabiting wet marshy lands, especially such as reside on the shores of rivers which inundate their banks to a considerable extent, are somewhat subject, during the vernal and autumnal months, to bilious remitting and intermitting fevers ; and those who have been re-

duced by the enervating corruptions of the frontier settlers have, of late years, been afflicted with typhus fever.

In the treatment of fevers the Indians almost uniformly commence by giving an emetic or cathartic, followed by sweating, which with them forms one of the principal remedies in most of their complaints. During the interval between the sweating periods, when there are symptoms of considerable debility, they make free use of tonics, which consist of bitter-roots, the colombo, (the *Fraxina Carolinensis*.) and beneset; of the names and medical properties of which I shall more fully treat in my anticipated publication.

Where violent pains accompany fevers, and are fixed in particular parts of the body, they foment with stimulating decoctions of herbs, and apply blisters on the pained parts, with hot poultices of the bark of moosewood pounded, united with several other vegetables possessing similar properties. Their fevers sometimes terminate critically by forming abscesses in various parts of the body. These terminations mostly occur in the glands of the throat or on the large joints of the extremities. These discharges are always encouraged by the application of warm emollients to the parts, it being the place, as they term it, where the disorder goes out: these local affections sometimes injure the limbs, or deform the body.

Rheumatism, which constitutes one of their most troublesome complaints, is treated by bleeding, sweating, purging, uncctions, frictions, bathing, fomenting, &c. If there be local swelling in particular parts they often scarify with a knife, or sharp stone, or fracture of flint rock, but the lancet is also now used among them, and venesection at the arm. They sometimes dig a hole in the ground of a depth and capacity to contain the patient, and build a large fire of dry sticks and brush over it; upon this they pour water and get in as warm as they can endure it. Bushes and leaves are placed over it in order to retain the vapour; in this situation, almost suffocated, they often remain an hour or more. When in, they drink warm teas of sweating herbs, and on coming out wrap themselves in a blanket or robe to prevent taking cold. This is a much more disa-

graceable mode of sweating than the sweat oven, a description of which will be given in another place. They submit to the above mode in obedience to an opinion among them that violent diseases require violent remedies to drive them out. It is much practised among the Kinkapoos and Shawanees. Their practice is tolerably successful in this disease ; though from almost continued exposure to the causes which originally produced it, they are very liable to relapses ; their mode of life in hunting and war, subjecting them much to the influence of wet and cold, and the uncertainty of supply rendering them more frequently victims of alternate abstinence and excess. Few of the men arrived at common age, escape this tormenting disease, and so sensible are the rheumatic to the varying temperature of the weather, that they always tell, or profess to tell, an approaching change in the state of the atmosphere ; and I am disposed to think the opinion entitled to some credit, as they generally make much complaint about such times. It is well known they seldom or ever complain without great cause, and frequently endure, without betraying the smallest degree of visible displeasure, the most excruciating pains.

Pulmonary consumption is a disease, it has been said, that does not at all exist among the Indians ; and some who admit it to be one of their maladies, confine it to those alone who have been unhappily debauched by the evil spirit of intoxicating liquors. The remark, however applicable to those tribes concerning whom it was stated, is far from being universally true ; many facts, too well established to admit of controversy, testify the reverse ; facts familiar to men, who could not be deceived in the character of a disease, the symptoms of which are so clearly marked. Nor is the disease confined to those alone who have been the dupes of that demoralizing beverage, whiskey, the article of traffick most generally taken among them by some of the traders, though it must be admitted to be much more frequent among such than among those who have never suffered by its abuse.

Those cases of consumption which I have witnessed among the Indians, and which may be ascribed to the intemperate use of

ardent spirits, do not appear to me to be the direct effect of the spirit, but by rendering them incapable of taking care of themselves and exposing them to all the attendant train of evils necessarily flowing from a loss of that sense of propriety, so necessary to our comfort and safety. The Indians have in many instances contracted the views and habits of civilized society, without adopting any of its improvements. They have lost much of their native vigour and activity by this unhappy intercourse, without improving their habitations and dress : added to this they are less qualified for those more temperate and salutary pursuits, on which their health and subsistence depend. When an Indian goes into the white settlements and becomes drunken, he commonly lies out, be the weather as it may ; when he rises from his stupor, he frequently takes another potation, and again places himself in the same situation. I have seen cases of this kind occur, and the practice kept up for days in succession, during which time very little food or exercise is taken. The effects on them are the same as on the whites : inflamed red eyes, with habitual weeping from them ; a sallow bloated complexion, and trembling of the joints ; indigestion, loss of appetite, and general debility, are the usual consequences of drunkenness among the Indians. These symptoms certainly predispose to diseases which the system otherwise might resist. And when this habit is for a considerable time continued it generally terminates the life of the subject, either by diarrhoea, dropsy, or pulmonary consumption. Independent of this cause, however, as before observed, consumptions exist among the Indians. Its approach is commonly gradual and almost imperceptible, and the symptoms are nearly as follows : a general dryness of the skin, alternate accessions and intermissions of fever, and shooting pains through the breast characterize the first state of the disease : cough and a dry state of the tongue and mouth, hurried respiration, a fixed pain in the breast, the second state, and fetid, purulent expectorations, more constant coughing, especially in the morning, or on any excessive exercise, night sweats, and diarrhoea, are common precursors

of the closing scene. Some persons whom I have seen die with this disease have swelled feet and legs just before death. The females among them are less subject to consumption than the males. I believe from what I have been able to learn that among the civilized this is otherwise. I have however witnessed death by consumption in a young Indian woman not more than two years since. She was of the Shawanee tribe on the Meramac river. Her case as nearly as I can recollect was as follows: she was about eighteen years of age; she went in company with a number of her tribe to Jackson, a small town in Cape Girardeau county, and state of Missouri, where from her attention to a drunken parent, she exposed herself so much as to cause an interruption in that periodical discharge so essential to the health of females. This was followed by a cough, for which marriage was recommended, to which prescription she submitted: the effect was palliative, she had a child in about a year after, and then became consumptive, and died within a few months after that event.

It would be useless to enumerate all the superstitious charms and incantations practised in the cure of this as well as other diseases among these people; some of which their white neighbours have learned them, and they owe the ignorant whites nothing in this respect; for some of them have as studiously copied their tawny brethren.

Their most efficacious remedies are emetics, sudorifics, stimulants, and tonics. When there appears to be an oppression in the breast and difficult breathing, they give an emetic. This is followed by sweating, and I believe to an injurious extent. They indulge in it till they become debilitated and feeble almost to fainting. They use internal sudorifics, also, which consists of nauseating warm teas, of roots, and herbs; and their stimulants and tonics are generally aromatic bitter roots and barks, plants, &c. They inhale the smoke of burning pitch also. The steam arising from bitter herbs placed on hot rocks, with water poured on them, is also part of the curative process. Local applications, when there are fixed pains, are also resorted to. These consist of little skins filled with hot

wet ashes, and bitter herbs applied immediately to the pained parts as warm as the patient can endure them. The warm alkalized bath is sometimes resorted to.

I have thus, sir, in a very imperfect manner, briefly stated to you a few facts which have fallen within my observation at a period of my life which necessarily precluded all the advantages of education: should they afford you any gratification it will be a pleasure to me. The subject is far from being exhausted, and only requires an abler hand than mine to render it interesting, which I hope, at some future day, to see prosecuted with success.

With sentiments of the highest respect, I am your greatly obliged friend,

JOHN D. HUNTER.