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NOTES ON THE THEORY AND TREATMENT OF DISEASES AMONG THE MACKENZIE RIVER ESKIMO.

BY V. STEFÁNSSON.

THE following notes were collected among the Eskimo east of the mouth of the Mackenzie River.

Formerly among the Mackenzie River Eskimo there were numerous "medicine-men." Their arts are practised — but with little faith — by men who look upon their own ministrations about as we do upon our efforts for an invalid's well-being at a time when a physician cannot be reached. The recent contact with missionaries, and intercourse with whalers since 1889 (and fur-traders a little earlier), have decreased the faith in magical practices, but not in counter-irritation and bleeding. The blood-letter's knife is the Eskimo's cure-all.

In general, so far as I could understand it, diseases are caused by "bad blood." The logical cure for most diseases is therefore bleeding. The incision is usually (but not always) over the seat of pain. In the first operation they seem satisfied with drawing a small quantity of blood; but if a second cutting becomes necessary, or a third one, more is drawn each time. The cutting is done by any one present who happens to have a sharp knife, or who is skilful through practice in performing these operations. Sometimes the patient himself does the cutting.

Most people are sick at one time or another. Especially as old age approaches do pains of various sorts become troublesome. A man or woman beyond middle life is therefore sure to have scars on various parts of the body. On one man's back alone I counted over twenty. Some of them, as nearly as could be learned, had been made for pleurisy, but others for rheumatism. Consumptives are cut both on the breast and back. Ordinarily the cuts are horizontal, and some scars I have seen indicate wounds two inches long. Certain kinds of pain are treated with vertical cuts. Boils, so far as my observation goes, are cut horizontally across the middle, the cut going as far to either side as the margin of the redness which surrounds the boil. The boil might be said to be bisected to base level.

The theory of disease depending on bad blood sometimes presents interesting variations. Snow-blindness, for instance, is described as follows: In winter, on account of the fact that the hood of the coat does not protect the front or top of the forehead forward of the cheek-bones, the blood is forced back by the cold from the eyes and temples to the top of the head; there it remains, thickened for the want of the sun's light and heat. In the spring, when the sun comes back after its midwinter stay below the horizon, the blood is gradually thinned out, and begins

to flow back of the forehead and eyes. The influx of this blood, which is now "bad," causes snow-blindness. The logical thing, of course, is to intercept it on its way down, to prevent its reaching the eyes. This is done by horizontal cuts just above each eyebrow, thus tapping the flow that would otherwise reach the eye-sockets, causing the violent pains and other symptoms of snow-blindness. But the trouble is that one can never tell when this downward spring flow of blood will start. If one cuts too early, the bleeding ceases before the bad blood comes down, and therefore does no good; if one waits for the first symptoms of snow-blindness (as one must do in practice), the cutting may come too late. If the operation fails to prevent the disease (it is not intended to cure, but merely to prevent), it is because it has been performed too late, or after large quantities of the bad blood had gotten into the eye-sockets.

When earache is caused in the ordinary way, — by bad blood, — it is treated by having a vertical cut, about an inch long and freely skin-deep, made in front of the affected ear over the prominence of the cheek-bone. Headache is treated with scalp-cuts over the seat of pain.

A native of Cape York, Alaska, a man who had lived for five years among the Mackenzie River people, gave me the following information regarding headache. He assured me that this theory is held both at Cape York and on the Mackenzie River.

Occasionally headache and earache have a far more serious cause than bad blood. If one sleeps with his ear on or near the ground, a pebble will sometimes get into one's ear. Apparently people are not agreed as to whether they always get there in a natural (or mechanical) way, or whether the pebble jumps up or otherwise exerts itself to get into the ear-passage. However that may be, it is certain that, once in, it begins eating its way inward, devouring the substance of the head, so that in some cases, when people die after protracted headache, their heads are so light that people know them to be absolutely empty, eaten clean by the voracious little stone.

When a pebble once has gotten in, cutting will of course do no good, for that merely removes "bad blood." Seal oil is therefore poured into the ear. This apparently numbs the pebble, thus preventing its eating away at the inside of the head. Fat disagrees with it, and tends to drive it out. To facilitate the egress, one should lie with the afflicted ear down. The pebble will usually drop out, though it does not always do so. Prevention is better than cure, so one should never camp on ground, or sleep, where a pebble is anywhere near one's ear.

At childbirth, especially if it be the first child, a boy is to be desired above all things. If one girl is already in the family, the arrival of a second is not greatly to be desired, for one son-in-law is sufficient support for one's old age. Possibly it is because a son is always more longed for than a daughter (no matter how welcome she may be), that good

fortune is so often changed to a worse immediately after birth, for it frequently happens that a child which is born a boy is found a few hours later to be a girl. It more rarely occurs that a child born a girl becomes a boy later in the day. In view of this possible transmutation of sex, it is customary for neighbors and friends to inquire about the sex of the child, both immediately after birth and a few hours later. If a father who was beaming an hour ago now looks glum, it may be that the mother or child is seriously ill, but more probably his little son has become an infant daughter.

If there is a normal presentation, childbirth is ordinarily easy; and the mother seems reasonably well an hour following, — is able to go about her ordinary work. Nevertheless she is under restrictions, the most noticeable of which are those in regard to diet. Although the other members of the household eat raw fish chiefly, hers will always be cooked, and preferably in snow-water. Her drinking-water should not be ordinary water, nor yet melted from ice, but melted from snow. Some say the snow should be melted over an oil-lamp, but others say it makes no difference how it is melted.

In most cases of illness, one should eat only cooked food. The writer saw this in cases of eye trouble, kidney disease, and an abdominal wound from a knife.

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