IATROGENIC VENEREOLOGICAL COMPLAINTS*

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"Iatrogenic" means "produced by doctors", although by analogy with "pathogenic" it should denote "producing doctors". "Complaint" has the double-edged meaning of ailment and accusation.

Case 1 The following was received from an ophthalmologist concerning a 46-year-old patient: "He has left hyalitis, which is secondary to cyclitis. The gonococcal complement-fixation test was weakly positive. I have told the patient the result of the blood test."

The patient's wife had left him after hearing the diagnosis but later returned to him. So many positive gonococcal complement-fixation tests were reported at the time that my predecessor had ignored them completely. When the laboratory was changed, no further equivocal results were obtained.

Case 2 Some months later, another 46-year-old man attended the same clinic, in the company of his wife. He handed me a letter from his general practitioner which read: "I would like your advice on the question of any further treatment for this patient. His wife and family do not know that he has the infection."

According to his hospital notes, his doctor had sent him to the medical clinic 9 months before, because of several episodes of sudden loss of consciousness. The physician could find no defect in the central nervous system, but had a Wassermann reaction and Kahn test performed. The results were reported as positive, and the patient was admitted to hospital and given 600,000 units of penicillin for 21 days. Two days before the treatment was started, another specimen of blood was sent, this time to a different laboratory, where the Wassermann reaction and Price's precipitation reaction were found to be negative. Further repeat tests were also negative. The patient told me about a "foolish thing" he had done a week or so before he came to see me: he had taken twenty tablets of phenobarbitone because people in the house had been nagging him. He related a long story with apparently quite irrelevant details, in which a chocolate cake predominated. He was happily unaware of the results of the first blood test. So was his wife.

Case 3 A 36-year-old widow was sent to the clinic by a dermatologist: "Would you kindly see this lady who had a lesion on the right upper lid resembling a rodent ulcer. Her WR and Kahn are positive."

I saw the patient together with her notes in which the Wassermann reaction and Price's precipitation reaction were shown to be negative. There were copies of letters to her general practitioner and to myself. Her ulcer had healed, and repeat blood tests were also negative, including the treponemal immobilization and a battery of other tests. Before the patient attended again, however, she was told by her general practitioner that she had syphilis. The dermatologist apologized as follows: "I was quite certain it was a positive result when I saw the red writing."

Case 4 A man aged 39 attended another clinic. He was glowing with self-righteousness. His wife—so he reported—had been a "VD case" at a certain hospital. It must be she who was unfaithful!

According to her notes she had been treated for inevitable abortion, her uterus was evacuated, and moderate numbers of trichomonads were found. On one occasion, I saw both patients in the clinic together for a whole hour, to let him air his suspicions and recriminations, and to persuade him that the findings did not necessarily prove her unfaithfulness.

Discussion

These cases show the potential dangers of diagnosing venereal disease without reason. Seale (1966) reported a suicide by a young woman who was interviewed because her contact had non-gonococcal urethritis, and she believed that she had "VD". They also show the wisdom of the Statute (1916), Article V (3) of which reads as follows:

"Venereal disease" means syphilis, gonorrhoea, and soft chancre.

Summary

The cases are described of four patients who were diagnosed as suffering from venereal disease without definite proof.

REFERENCES

- Seale, J. R. (1966). *Brit. J. vener. Dis.*, 42, 31.
The Public Health (Venereal Diseases) Regulations, 1916, Article V (3). H.M.S.O., London.

Les maladies vénériennes iatrogéniques

RÉSUMÉ

Quatre cas qui avaient été diagnostiqués comme atteints de maladie vénérienne sans preuves indiscutables sont décrits.

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