A DIPHTHERIA EPIDEMIC IN THE EARLY EIGHTIES

As early as 1877 there were a few fatal cases of diphtheria in Sleepy Eye, Minnesota, and its vicinity. They caused no particular alarm in the minds of people outside the families immediately concerned. Nor were these cases followed by such devastating results as came later. At that time few, if any, believed that the disease was "catching." Thus no quarantine measures were taken. This probably accounts, in some degree at least, for the spread of diphtheria in the years immediately succeeding 1877. Later it was generally believed that weather conditions caused, or at least aided, the rapidity with which the disease swept over the town and country around Sleepy Eye, for none would yet concede that it could be carried from one home to another. The great majority of the people made no effort to quarantine cases, and the few who perhaps dimly sensed the possibility of contagion confined their precautions to avoiding their usual visits with families in which a child had "black diphtheria." Even such people paid no attention to light cases. It must be admitted, however, that some of the light cases did not develop symptoms sufficiently alarming to be noticed, unless the parents happened to be looking for them.

During the years 1878 and 1879 the number of fatal cases increased to such an extent that the residents of both town and country began to doubt the correctness of their previously formed opinions in the matter. The next year they became really alarmed; for cases were increasing by leaps and bounds and none of the doctors seemed to be able to save a child afflicted with what was then called black diphtheria. By 1880 the plague had reached the epidemic stage. People had at last come to realize the serious na-

ture of the situation, and with this realization came the conviction of their utter helplessness.

In the two years previous to 1880 diphtheria had broken out in spots throughout Sleepy Eye and the surrounding country districts, and early in 1880 it was rapidly spreading and increasing in virulence and intensity. And there was no specific, no method of treatment known either by local or city physicians, that would cure the disease in its worst form. The lack of knowledge of the cause or of any preventive or curative agents was staggering to doctors as well as to laymen. Light cases were cured with or without treatment. The suffering in the more severe cases was alleviated to some slight extent; but the end came usually with startling certainty and machine-like regularity. And the time was short—four days, sometimes dragged out to a few days longer by the extraordinary vitality of the patient or, perhaps, by medical care and nursing. There could be, however, no assurance of even this.

A few patients apparently recovered from diphtheria, only to die suddenly of heart failure days or even weeks later. In these cases of heart weakness, the physicians, when they could be reached in time, were able to help and to save a few. But to parents and relatives, the death of a child after strong hopes of recovery had been aroused and almost ripened into certainty was, if possible, even more tragic than the swiftly certain outcome of other fatal cases.

In the early stages of the epidemic, it was argued, apparently with good reason, that the disease, especially in its most virulent form, was a product of, or at least was aggravated by, insanitary conditions in the homes. It soon developed beyond the possibility of doubt that the very neatest families living in commodious homes in both town and country suffered as much as those who lived in small, squalid, and poorly ventilated hovels. The cause of the disease thus became the puzzle of the day to both physicians and laymen of the locality.

Physicians worked heroically, worried and studied day and night, traveled long distances in storm and cold in unheated buggies or sleighs, and stayed by the bedsides of patients during critical hours, but they got nowhere. The day of the specific "germ-chaser" was not yet — at least so far as the diphtheria germ was concerned — and it was not due to arrive until slowly dragging decades had passed. These decades saw the tragic end from diphtheria in infancy and early adolescence of many of the most robust and promising children, as well as of the mentally and physically subnormal, of their generation. Although diphtheria was considered preëminently a children's disease, a number of grown people, including the village marshal, died of it, and not a few suffered weakened hearts and lowered vitality.

There were no school nurses at Sleepy Eye in those gloomy, heartbreaking days. Only two or three women made any pretense of knowing something of the art of nursing. These worked like beavers; but for the most part the parents of the stricken youngsters nursed them as best they could. They were helped only by the doctors, who literally rode night and day. The physicians worked with the knowledge that they could do little more than sympathize, offer suggestions as to caring for patients, and apply the best-known remedies, always hoping that the patients' own vitality would in some miraculous way work a cure. But the physician's big job was to keep up the courage of the parents, to cheer his patients, and — perhaps incidentally, but most important of all — to keep up his own courage. This was no easy task.

As the scourge advanced in its course, practically unhindered by man or climatic conditions, some families were left with one, two, or, rarely, three children. Others were left without any. Fred Gerboth and his wife, who lived two and one-half miles east of Sleepy Eye, had a family of six children, a boy and five very pretty and intelligent girls. The boy was about sixteen years old; the girls ranged from

thirteen or fourteen down to three or four. The Gerboths were very neat and intelligent people. Gerboth was a candidate for the state legislature. Before he moved to the farm he had kept a store in Iberia, which in its day was a lively, if small, village about four miles south and one mile east of Sleepy Eye. The diphtheria suddenly came into the home of the Gerboths. In a matter of days they had laid away all five girls, one at a time. Only the boy was left to them. The tragedy so affected Gerboth's mind that he was obliged to withdraw from the campaign. So far as is known, he never entirely recovered from the shock.

Louis Hanson lived southeast of town about five miles. He and his wife had five children. The scourge came in and took all five. It was a sad sight to see Hanson driving up the road every day or two on his way to the cemetery, alone with his dead. The children died between August 26 and September 5. There were no funeral services or processions for the little ones — just simple interments with little or no ceremony. By this time people were thoroughly frightened and were wondering how the epidemic would end, and when. Voluntarily, families kept to themselves as much as was possible; but the precaution was like locking the door after the horse was gone.

Few, if any, families with children escaped the ravages of the plague entirely. Some had the disease in light form, however, and they became immune to later attacks. The epidemic reached its peak in 1880. Fatalities gradually diminished as the people upon whom the germs could work were reduced in number by death and immunization. The course of the disease, even in its lightest form, seemed to prepare the blood of the patient to resist successfully all future attacks of the germs for long periods of time, if not for life. In epidemic form, diphtheria was practically unknown in Sleepy Eye after 1883. Later cases were sporadic and did not spread with epidemic speed, even among children who were born after the epidemic of 1880 and among

newly arrived settlers. Later outbreaks probably failed to spread because quarantine laws had been enacted and were fairly well obeyed by people who had learned a costly lesson.

Doubtless other parts of the country suffered more or less from this nemesis of child life during the late seventies and succeeding years. It was estimated that in Sleepy Eye and its vicinity alone between eighty and ninety deaths were caused by diphtheria during and immediately preceding the period of its epidemic stage.

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