

# **DIPHTHERIA**

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Diphtheria by Morell Mackenzie

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**MORELL MACKENZIE**

# **DIPHTHERIA**



## PREFACE.

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NEARLY twenty years having elapsed since any English work has appeared on the subject of Diphtheria, and medical views as to the nature and treatment of the disease having undergone considerable development during that period, it has appeared to me that a short sketch of the affection, from one who has had considerable opportunities of studying it, might be of interest, and possibly of use, to the profession.

A malady which, under various names, has existed for so many thousand years, which has been so widely diffused, and which has caused such dire havoc, must always be of interest to the student of medicine.

The victims of the disease have generally been children of tender years, but vigorous youth has frequently fallen under the scourge, and anxious parents have too often suffered for their watchful solicitude. In its attacks it shows no respect for distinctions of sex or social position. Rich and poor, strong and weak, alike fall beneath its onslaught, and its ravages are greater in scattered villages than among the crowded denizens of our great cities.

Sanitary science has not yet learned to bar its progress, and, in some instances, arrangements—professedly hygienic—have even appeared to favor its entrance.

Although epidemics of this disease have not influenced the progress of civilization like those plagues of the Middle Ages, which more especially attacked adults, yet the historian may chronicle the fact that the illustrious Washington died from the disease in the course of a few hours; that the unfortunate Empress Josephine, whose family had previously shown a marked susceptibility to the affection, quickly succumbed to it; and that—since these pages were in type—our own country has been plunged into profound grief through this fatal pestilence.

Long shall we all deplore the loss of the gentle and accomplished Princess whose soothing ministrations had so often alleviated the sufferings of others.

M. M.

19 HARLEY STREET,  
*December, 1878.*

## CONTENTS.

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|  | PAGE |
|--|------|
| CHAPTER I.                             |      |
| DEFINITION AND HISTORY, . . . . .      | 13   |
| CHAPTER II.                            |      |
| ETIOLOGY, . . . . .                    | 22   |
| CHAPTER III.                           |      |
| SYMPTOMS, . . . . .                    | 33   |
| CHAPTER IV.                            |      |
| PARALYSES, . . . . .                   | 45   |
| CHAPTER V.                             |      |
| DIAGNOSIS, . . . . .                   | 50   |
| CHAPTER VI.                            |      |
| PATHOLOGY, . . . . .                   | 53   |
| CHAPTER VII.                           |      |
| PROGNOSIS, . . . . .                   | 63   |
| CHAPTER VIII.                          |      |
| TREATMENT, . . . . .                   | 65   |
| CHAPTER IX.                            |      |
| LARYNGO-TRACHEAL DIPHThERIA, . . . . . | 79   |
| CHAPTER X.                             |      |
| NASAL DIPHThERIA, . . . . .            | 97   |
| CHAPTER XI.                            |      |
| SECONDARY DIPHThERIA, . . . . .        | 98   |

“Un subietto così interessante per la scienza, così doloroso per le famiglie, che mette tanta paura e tante apprensioni pur troppo giustificate ai genitori che vedendo scherzarsi all' intorno i loro figli dalle bianche e vermiglie guance, dai biondi e riccioluti capelli, dai festevoli modi, dagli innocenti solazzi, pensano che in poche ore tanta copia di affetti, tanta speranza di avvenire può essere troncata da questo morbo così spesso inaspettato, infrenabile dall'arte, e forse incompreso dalla scienza.”

ZANNETTI.



# DIPHTHERIA.

## CHAPTER I.

### DEFINITION AND HISTORY.

*Diphtheria is a specific, communicable disease, occurring epidemically, endemically, and solitarily,\* and characterized by more or less inflammation of the mucous membrane of the pharynx, larynx, or air-passages, and by the formation on the surface of those parts—especially on the mucous membrane of the fauces and windpipe—of a layer or layers of lymph or false membrane, generally showing signs of bacteroid mycosis. During an epidemic other mucous surfaces exposed to the air, and wounded surfaces of the common integument occasionally, but less frequently, become covered with a layer of lymph, subsequently to or independently of a formation of membrane in the more ordinary situations. The disease is generally of an adynamic character, is often associated with a disturbance of the renal function (albuminuria), and is frequently followed by lesions of innervation rarely giving rise to permanent paralysis. The symptoms as regards respiration, vocalization, and deglutition vary with the site of the disease. By far the larger proportion of fatal cases terminate by gradual apnoea, but a certain percentage sink from asthenia, blood-poisoning, and cardiac thrombosis.*

Several pages might be written of synonyms which, at different times, have been employed in describing diphtheritic affections, but simple inflammatory diseases, distinctly pellicular affections, and lesions of innervation have been so confused together by the earlier writers on medicine, that

\* I have used this word in preference to the term "sporadic," which is commonly employed in connection with diseases supposed to be of spontaneous origin, or at any rate is applied to those which it is presumed arise from accidental causes, independently of any contagious influence.

there is little or no advantage to be gained by collecting the numerous synonyms employed by different authors at various times. The term *diphtheritis* was originally suggested by Bretonneau, who, observing that the disease was differentiated from other similar maladies by the formation of a false skin or membrane, coined the word *diphtherite* from the Greek *διφθέρα*, a skin or parchment, and *ίτε*, from *ίτης* (*ίτις*), hasty, impetuous, the well-known termination used in medicine to imply inflammation. Trousseau subsequently modified the word to *diphthérie*, in order to get rid of the etiological doctrine of inflammation which the affix indicated, and the term *diphtheria* was adopted by our Registrar-Generals. Names indicative of inflammation still hold their ground, however, amongst German and Italian writers.

The presence of a membraniform deposit in the fauces seems to have been regarded as a morbid condition, attended with considerable danger to life, from the earliest times. At a time nearly coeval with that of Pythagoras, D'havantare, an Indian physician, had included in his "System of Medicine"\* a description which is very suggestive of diphtheria. The writer mentions a disease in which "an increase of phlegm and blood causes a swelling in the throat, characterized by panting and pain, destroying the vital organs, and incurable."† He also says, "a large swelling in the throat, impeding food and drink, and marked by violent feverish symptoms, obstructing the passage of the breath, arising from phlegm combined with blood, is called 'closing of the throat.'"‡ It has been supposed by some that Hippocrates§ recognized the disease more than two thousand years ago,

\* This systematic work on medicine is written in Sanskrit by D'havantare, and compiled by his pupil, Susruta. A Latin translation, by F. Hessler, was published at Erlangen in 1844, and is in the British Museum; it has the following title: "Susrutae Ayurvédas; id est Medicinæ Systema a Venerabili D'havantare Demonstratum a S. Discipulo Compositum." It is from this translation that the quotations in the text are taken.

† Ibid. p. 202.

‡ Ibid. p. 205. The following passage may also possibly describe diphtheria: "Si quis valde lugens semper suspirat, interruptam vocem, et aridum solumque sonum habet in respirationis vitis, phlegmate oblitis, hic morbus propter suspirium vocis occisor cognoscendus est." Ibid. 206.

§ "De Dentitione."

but it is extremely doubtful whether his observations really referred to diphtheria. On the other hand, "the Syriac ulcer," described by Aretæus\* (probably in the time of Augustus) is generally considered to have more points of resemblance to the diphtheria of to-day than any other disease of antiquity. Describing ulcers on the tonsils, Aretæus tells us that some are mild and harmless, while others are pestilential and fatal. The former—which are common—are clean, small, and superficial, and are unaccompanied either by pain or inflammation. The latter—which are rare—are extensive, deep, putrid, and covered with white, livid, or blackish concretion. Aretæus then goes on to depict the way in which, in fatal cases, the disease progresses, stating that "if it extends rapidly to the chest through the windpipe, the patient dies on the same day by suffocation." About a century later, Galen† referred to the expectoration of a membranous tunic from the pharynx, but did not actually describe diphtheria. Cælius Aurelianus,‡ at the end of the third century, describes the "barking" sound of the voice and its occasional complete extinction, the stridulous breathing, and lividity of face. His reference to the defective articulation sometimes present, and to the passage of fluids into the nose in swallowing, probably refer to the paralytic symptoms of the disease. It is supposed that the Askara frequently mentioned in the Talmud§ as a fatal epidemic was, in fact, diphtheria. Rashi, the learned commentator of the Talmud and Old Testament, remarks with reference to the Askara, that "sometimes it breaks out in the mouth of a man, and he dies from it." He further observes that "sudden death ensues from suffocation."

\* Aretæus: "De Causis et Signis Acutorum Morborum," lib. i, cap. 9.

† "De Locis Affectis," lib. i, c. i.

‡ "De acutis Morbis," lib. iii, c. 2 et c. 4.

§ The word "Askara" (אִסְכָּרָא or אִסְכָּרָה) means literally "closure," and is allied to the word Sakar (סָכַר), "to shut up" or "to close." Askara is frequently used in the Aramaic dialect of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Rabbins. Its effect is compared to strangulation, and its danger consists in its being communicable to others. Some modern lexicographers translate "Askara" by "Croup." Buxtorf, in the Basle edition of the Talmud (1689), renders it by "Angina." I am indebted to the well-known Hebrew scholar, the Rev. A. Löwy, for most of my information on this subject.