

**ON BRAIN AND NERVE
EXHAUSTION,
'NEURASTHENIA', ITS NATURE
AND CURATIVE TREATMENT**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649373642

On Brain and Nerve Exhaustion, 'neurasthenia', Its Nature and Curative Treatment by Thomas Stretch Dowse

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THOMAS STRETCH DOWSE

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'NEURASTHENIA', ITS NATURE
AND CURATIVE TREATMENT**

ON
BRAIN AND NERVE EXHAUSTION.
'NEURASTHENIA.'

ITS NATURE AND CURATIVE TREATMENT.

A Paper read before the Medical Society of London.

BY

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'Excess of anything throws us off our balance. Excess of spirits one day generally means being "down in the dumps" on the next, while excess of food means indigestion and all its unpleasant associations. Excess of pleasure means a weary *blaze* existence after, and inability to derive gratification from the same source, while true moderation and order are the secrets of a healthy and wholesome life.'

THE INVALID'S YEAR BOOK. By Sir James Colquhoun, Bart.



LONDON:
BAILLIÈRE, TINDALL, AND COX, 20, KING WILLIAM STREET, STRAND.
[PARIS AND MADRID.]

1880.

151. m. 500.

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PREFACE.

THIS paper was read before the Medical Society of London, on April 26th, 1880, and has been published in pamphlet form at the request of some of the Fellows of the Society.

I am well aware that it does but scant justice to the very important subject of which it treats. Yet, as I feel greatly assured of the significance and importance of the subject treated, I venture to hope that this little pamphlet will meet with a not unfavourable reception from those who take an interest in the matter of Neurasthenia.

THOMAS STRETCH DOWSE.

14, WEIßBECK STREET,
CAVENDISH SQUARE, W.
June, 1880.

ON NEURASTHENIA;
OR,
BRAIN AND NERVE EXHAUSTION;
Its Nature and Treatment.

THE more one studies the laws of nature, as exemplified in the mysterious and wonderful processes of life, the more one feels how inadequate is the mind of man to comprehend even the most primitive laws which govern his material being. Scarcely a year rolls round that the world is not surprised by the revelation of some new discovery, which is looked upon as the outcome of the inventive genius of man, and which shows that the forces of nature have been either so elaborated, or correlated, that a hitherto unknown factor has been produced which, in itself, throws all other novelties into the shade; and so it is in the world of scientific and practical medicine. Theories, are constantly springing up concerning the nature and treatment of disease, some simple, others elaborate and complex, which have a period of renown, and then fall into disuse and are forgotten; and so far forgotten, in fact, that at some remote period they are reintroduced as something new.

There can be no doubt, however, that the solid advance which is daily being made in the material sphere of science will aid the biologist in unravelling many vexed problems with regard to what we know concerning the special

functions of man's body, and which knowledge will have another important bearing, namely, to convince the man of science what a wide gulf must ever exist between the finite and the infinite. In the consideration of the asthenic or exhausted state of the nervous system we are naturally led to make some inquiry in reference to its cause, and we have to find out whether the vital arrest of nervous energy is general, or whether it is local or circumscribed. As an instance of general vital exhaustion of the nervous system we will take the man who dies from what is called 'General Paralysis of the Insane,' and, as an instance of local or circumscribed vital exhaustion, the man who, during an attack of diphtheria, dies from exhaustion of the nervous centres, which give motor power to the walls of the heart. However we meet with ordinary examples of nervous exhaustion every day of our lives in some form, and it is only these kinds of nervous exhaustion we shall consider somewhat fully ; although the question is far too comprehensive to be treated in a short paper of this kind in any other but a superficial way. Dr. Geo. M. Beard, of New York City, was the first physician who drew the especial attention of the profession to the signs and symptoms of this disease, and he subdivides the term *Neurasthenia* into *Cerebrasthenia* (exhaustion of the brain) and *Myelasthenia* (exhaustion of the spinal cord), Erb, in Ziemssen's, 'Cyclopedia of Medicine,' vol. xiii., devotes a short special chapter to what he calls *Neurasthenia of the Spinal Cord*. I assure you, gentlemen, that for many years I discarded the term *Neurasthenia* or nervous exhaustion, for when I was in the midst of pathological work I thought the term vague and unscientific, and I expected the scalpel and the microscope to reveal to me the cause of any arrest of nervous function. I am happy to say, that as I have grown older so have I grown wiser in this respect : and I am therefore now very glad to have recourse to a term, which is in every way most applicable to a number of nervous derangements. When we speak of

the exhaustion of a nerve, or of a nervous centre, or of the exhaustion of the brain, or of the spinal cord, or of the exhaustion of the whole nervous system, we refer to what must be understood as a diseased condition, although it is, in the strict sense of the word, merely an arrest of function and something more, the precise nature of which *something more*, however, it is oftentimes a difficult matter to determine. Healthful sleep is due to nervous exhaustion, consequent upon an arrest of function in the hemisphere of the brain; and during this temporary arrest of function, the trophic or nutritive elements are still actively employed, and the brain-cells are being recharged with nutritive pabulum in the form of bioplasm. The arrest of function alone would not restore energy to an exhausted nervous centre, and, if nutrition were not going on during sleep, the person would not wake up invigorated and refreshed. In the cases of exhaustion of the brain, caused by excessive pain, which we find associated, for instance, with cancer, or in the exhaustion of the brain which we find frequently accompanies persons suffering from consumption, we see our patients completely exhausted from want of sleep, which is also due to arrest of function in the hemispheres of the brain. Function in this instance, however, is not only not perfectly carried out, but the laws of nutrition are so inactive that the very effort at repair of the exhausted brain cells produces an irritability of function incompatible either with rest or with repair of the exhausted state. In my wards for consumption at the Central London Sick Asylum, at Highgate, I used frequently to observe to the nurse that such a patient was suffering, or apparently suffering, more from an exhausted brain, than from disease of the lungs, and the signs of that condition are well known. The eye will be bright, the countenance distrustful and anxious, the temper irritable, delusions and hallucinations not uncommon, and in some cases even self-control will be lost, inasmuch that the patient may become violent.