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A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

Some of the hospitals in northern Italy (By a Holiday Correspondent) ***Male Lunatic Asylum in Venice***

The adjoining island to this is now called San Servolo, and on it since A.D. 1715 the priests of the Order of St John of God have devoted themselves to the care of 600 madmen, chiefly from the province of Venezia, which pays 5*d.* a day for each of its pauper inmates. The statistics are published every five years, and I was presented with the last report, which consists chiefly of a long treatise by the superintendent on the physiology of the brain and cerebellum and on some proofs of the Darwinian theory. The tables of statistics show that during the last five years 624 admissions took place; 369 inmates went out and 273 died, besides some 600 who began and ended the quinquennial period. Of the 1241 total admissions 291 were due to pellagra, 100 to alcohol, 97 to epilepsy, 167 to simple melancholia, 78 to acute mania, and 150 to chronic mania. The pellagra patients were all peasants, mostly between twenty and sixty years of age, while the bulk of the alcoholics were young bachelor artisans. There were 29 deaths out of 40 cases of general paralysis, but by far the largest number of deaths – 72 – was from pellagra. The 291 cases of pellagra were all due to poverty, and in 137 cases there was a predisposing family history of pellagra, while in 148 cases the family history was unknown, and in only 6 cases was it certain that there was no question of this disease in the family. While I was waiting for permission to visit the asylum an old priest was trying to relieve a patient – a young gardener – of a troublesome tooth. But the tooth was stubborn and refused to come out after six attempts. Then came a jolly-looking young priest who had a doctor's diploma from Padua, and who showed me all I wanted to see with the greatest courtesy. He began by showing me many pictures and other works of art done by the patients, and then a very valuable collection of photographs, for every patient is photographed on admission and the clinical notes are not considered complete without it. In addition to the medical priests the asylum is visited every day by a lay physician. The priests themselves allow that it is old-fashioned and hardly comes up to modern requirements. There is no padded room and there are no camisoles. Restraint is freely used, chiefly by a leather muff for both hands, and for more serious cases by a waist belt and anklets in addition, which enable a man to be tied in bed by means of light chains. One big man had been tied in his bed in this way for twelve years! The floors are of mosaic cement, and are strewn with sawdust at night to soak up the patients' excreta! The consequence is that all the wards have a urinous odour, and the stagnant summer air reminds one of certain ill-ventilated prisons. The attendants, of whom there are sixty-eight, at my afternoon visit were lying about on forms or beds and were very slovenly dressed. I was shown several of the pellagra patients with erythematous patches on the face, hands, elbows, and feet. All had tongues denuded, or partially so, of epithelium, and non-symmetrical exaggeration of knee reflexes. Some were talking hard all the time, but were not otherwise excited. A few of the patients were of a class who paid for their maintenance, but they were apparently all treated in the same way. The space in the dormitories was 32 cubic metres for each patient. Fresh water is obtained in abundance from artesian wells 200 feet deep, for the salt water surrounding the island is only 20 feet deep. Such of the island is not occupied by the madhouse is laid out in gardens, vineries, dairies, and poultry yards, in all of which some of the chronic patients work or pretend to work. One of the most interesting patients in the asylum was a blind albino aged twenty-four, a microcephalic idiot 4ft 5½in in height.

Reference

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