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Our Developing Knowledge of Gonorrhoea and Syphilis

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Mankind has struggled against venereal disease for thousands of years. Gonorrhoea was recognized as a definite disease in remote times. Its contagiousness and transmission by sexual contact are discussed in the old testament. The word "gonorrhoea" means flow of seed, and not as stated sometimes as a flow of women, and refers of course to the discharge that is characteristic of the disease in men as well as in women.

The early history of syphilis is more obscure and subject to differences of opinion. Some claim the disease was described by Chinese writers 3,000 years B.C. Certain phrases in the old testament like "the itch whereof thou canst not be healed" and "running issue of his flesh" are regarded by some to refer to syphilis. Be that as it may, clean-cut recognition of the disease as distinct and as venereal in origin dates from the frightful pandemic of syphilis in Europe at the end of the fifteenth century, which it is claimed by some was introduced by the sailors of Columbus from America. The American origin of syphilis is denied or seriously questioned by others.

The names of syphilis have been legion. The name "syphilis" was given the disease by the Italian poet-physician, Francastor, in 1530 in that most celebrated of medical poems, also called "syphilis," wherein the disease is described as sent into the world to punish a shepherd by the name of Syphilus for blaming the plague of his sheep on the gods.

In the same year the Swiss physician, Paracelsus, identified gonorrhoea with syphilis and things became hopelessly mixed for more than 300 years, the "identists" holding that the two diseases were identical, the "dualists" that they were different. Owing probably largely to the prevalence of mixed infection, the question seemed beyond solution by observation of the diseases, and experiment was necessary to settle the matter.

And now fate played one of her cruel tricks because when the great English pathologist and surgeon, John Hunter, inoculated himself in 1767 with gonorrhoeal pus, syphilis developed. This unhappy experiment shows us that at that time the necessity and the means of using a pure virus were not understood clearly enough. It was not until 1860 that Ricord in Paris, a great experimenter and reformer, who by the way was born in Baltimore, showed conclusively that gonorrhoea and syphilis are different diseases, and when the microbe of gonorrhoea, the gonococcus, was discovered in 1879, the voice of the identists were stilled for good and ever.

That the cause of venereal disease must be living contagion was an old idea, and in the case of syphilis we are told that no less than 125 distinct causative agents were advanced before Fritz Schaudinn, a young Berlin zoologist, in 1905, discovered the almost invisible spiral parasite that causes this dreaded disease. About the same time it was learned that in experiments syphilis can be transmitted to apes, monkeys and rabbits.

Since gonorrhoea and syphilis became subjected to exact study and experiment, we have learned a great deal that is new and of the greatest importance in regard to their nature, diagnosis, prevention and treatment.