

## A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

### The Aetiology of General Paralysis

Dr. Emil Hougberg, assistant physician in the Asylum of Lappvik, near Helsingfors, in Finland, has made an important contribution to the question whether general paralysis is caused by syphilis ("Allgemeine Zeitschrift für Psychiatrie," L. Band, 3 and 4 Heft).

Dr. Hougberg remarks that one group of psychiatric physicians, including most of the French, do not give any high importance to syphilis as a cause of paralytic dementia, laying more stress upon the abuse of alcohol, excess in venery, and injuries to the head.

Dr. Hougberg objects that those who support this view do not take sufficient pains to make sure whether their patients really have had syphilis or not. On the other hand the psychiatric physicians of Scandinavia and Finland hold that general paralysis is a disease entirely caused by an earlier infection of syphilis. The German alienists with Mendel for the most part take a middle position. Though they admit that syphilis is an important factor in the production of so-called paralytic dementia, they do not consider it to be its sole cause.

Dr. Hougberg's own observations were made upon 107 patients, 98 of whom were males and nine females. The details are given at length in a paper of 82 pages. He found syphilis to have been undoubtedly present in 81 per cent. of his cases, and probably so in 11·2 per cent., thus raising the proportion to 92·2 per cent. This is the highest ratio

recorded by any observer save Dengler, who found syphilis in 28 out of 30 cases, equal to 93 per cent.

Dr. Hougberg arrived at the following conclusions:—

1. General paralysis is a disease which especially affects the town population of Finland. It does not affect women of the better classes.

2. The importance of syphilis as a factor in progressive paralysis seems to be very great, especially when we consider that venereal disease plays no large part in the causation of other forms of insanity.

3. General paralysis, which comes on most frequently between the ages of 30 and 45 years, makes its appearance from four to five years after the syphilitic infection.

4. The symptoms of constitutional syphilis which precede general paralysis are of a mild character.

5. Compared with syphilis, the other assigned causes, such as hereditary predisposition, affections of the mind, abuse of alcohol, and excess in venery, play but a subordinate part.

6. In paralytic dementia known to have followed syphilis there were no distinctive symptoms from the cases in which syphilis was presumed to be absent. No benefit was derived from anti-syphilitic treatment, nor were any alterations of a specially syphilitic character found on examination *post-mortem*.

### Reference

*Journal of Mental Science*, July 1894, 464.

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