NUTMEG POISONING.

BY A. MARIUS WILSON, M.D., F.R.S.S.Af.

(Read October 20, 1909.)

A lady, aged 35 years, who had given birth to eight children, had heard that as an abortifacient grated nutmeg was safe and reliable. She therefore carefully grated one nutmeg, boiled it with a breakfast-cupful of beer (brewed in the Peninsula) and drank every drop of the mixture about 11 p.m., just before getting into bed. Nutmeg she was used to with her food, but very rarely ever touched stimulants. About 5 a.m. next morning she woke "feeling very ill, numb, dull, and heavy all over." She then tried to sit up, but only fell back again, and so roused her husband. To him she complained of "feeling so ill, my heart is jumping, and I think I am going to die." Off he ran for the nearest doctor, who came and saw the patient soon after quarter past five. He found her very excitable about her approaching end, ordered some bromides and also castor oil. The bowels were moved about 11 o'clock.

Later on, as this lady had been a patient of mine for some years, I was called in and saw her at quarter to ten. I found her lying in bed, unwilling to move, eyelids closed, and heard from her much of what I have already related. It seemed to be an effort on her part to speak; I therefore obtained more details from her husband. When the attack had quite passed away, she informed me that, though she might have appeared very drowsy, she was wide awake and was listening keenly to everything said, but felt she could not open her eyes or join in the conversation. There was no vomiting, nor even any nausea, but there was great thirst; the lips, tongue, palate, and throat were very dry and parched, and this continued for three days. The pupils were equal and neither contracted nor dilated. The eyelids were closed and, in common with the rest of the muscular system, seemed to have lost much of their power. The heart and pulse were beating regularly and at a fairly normal rate. The urine showed nothing. The most marked feature was the feeling of impending death and constriction of the thorax. Though talking seemed to be an exertion, the patient many times made the

statement, "I feel very ill." She remained in bed for four days on antispasmodic treatment, getting up on the fifth day feeling very weak. Since then she has quite recovered, but feels certain she will never forget the awful sensation of approaching dissolution. The abortive treatment was unsuccessful.

I can only find a record of four cases of nutmeg poisoning, and in two the spice was taken with the object of producing abortion—in each case uselessly.

The first: The patient was three months advanced in pregnancy, and she took three grated nutmegs, and would have taken more only she began to be nauseated. Three hours later she started vomiting, and soon relapsed into a state of low muttering delirium. In this case also the feeling of impending death was pronounced. This case recovered on the second day.*

The second: The patient, aged 26 years, was one week over her menstrual period, and she took two bruised nutmegs in a little gin. She vomited, was very drowsy, had normal pupils, was giddy and felt faint on attempting to stand, and complained of a sensation of great tightness across the chest. She recovered after two days.†

The third: A boy, aged 3 years, consumed part of five nutmegs. He slept for 30 hours. Symptoms: Vertigo, narcosis, dilated pupils, no delirium.‡

The fourth: A farmer, who was troubled with boils, took one grated nutmeg in milk at night. He found, when he woke at 6 o'clock next morning, that he was giddy, could not distinguish objects around, and his head was paining him. When seen by the doctor he appeared drowsy, but could be roused when spoken to sharply. He then complained of great pain in his head, great thirst, that his mouth and tongue were parched, and much numbness of the limbs. Pulse 70, regular; heart sounds normal; pupils slightly contracted. Except for a slight headache, next morning he was quite well.§

The greater part of the world's supply of nutmegs comes from the Banda Islands, a group in the Malayan Archipelago. These islands are subject to alteration in number owing to frequent volcanic eruptions. They were discovered by the Portuguese in 1511 and held by them till the next century, when the Dutch took possession. From that time onwards the ownership drifted between Holland and England, but the islands have been Dutch colonies since the Treaty of Paris in 1814.

The nutmeg of commerce is the dried seed of *Myristica fragrans* divested of its coverings, of which the fibrous substance of crimson colour, when dried, becomes the mace of commerce. The seed is

* Reading, *Therap. Gazette*, 1892.

† Simpson, *Lancet*, 1895.

‡ Sawyer, *N.Y. Med. Journ.*, 1889.

§ Bentlif, *British Med. Journ.*, 1889.

composed chiefly of starch, a compressed oil (nutmeg-butter) and a volatile oil. The ripe fruit is carefully gathered, split in half, and therefrom is taken the single seed. The seed is then carefully dried in a special drying-house—the process taking many weeks. When dry, the hard covering is cracked and the kernel is then treated with dry lime to prevent germination. This latter process is said to be unnecessary if the drying has been properly carried out. The whole fruit in syrup is used as comfit in the Dutch East Indies.

In medicine, the nutmeg is used chiefly to cover the taste of less pleasant-tasting drugs, and locally it is thought to be of use in rheumatic troubles. The dose of the powder is given as from 5 to 15 grains. In the case I have described, not more than 84 grains can have been taken. I asked my patient to pick out a nutmeg from a tinful as nearly as possible exactly like the one she grated and took. The one selected weighed 84 grains. Now, under ordinary circumstances, that much nutmeg should not produce such violent symptoms. It is not unreasonable to suppose that there must have been very many cases of little children putting away a great deal more than 84 grains, and not suffering any very ill-effects. The spice is to be found in (I suppose) every household throughout the civilised world. It is not usual to keep it under lock and key, and little children are very inquisitive and taste even repugnant things. The spice is used also very largely in cooking, and if as small a dose as 84 grains is dangerous, there should be numerous cases of ill-effects arising in persons sensitive to this drug who are taking fair-sized amounts in their food every day. Surely one should look for poisonous symptoms when the fruit is used as a sweetmeat.

I believe the explanation of poisonous symptoms is the condition of the nutmeg: germination must have commenced. It is not unreasonable to suspect that a few nutmegs have escaped from the thorough destruction of the power of germinating—the germination may have started and then been killed, but after some chemical change has taken place. Here, in Cape Town, we have a seed very largely eaten by children—the pine seed, known locally as the *Dana pitje*. No untoward symptoms arise even when dozens of these “pitjes” are eaten; but let the child eat one that has started germinating and the consequences are extremely serious.

As I have already stated, recorded cases of nutmeg poisoning are not numerous, nor have I heard of any instance where the result was fatal. The symptoms described in the cases I have referred to have varied, and I think there is room for closer observation. I should like to repeat that in my case the most pronounced symptom was the expectation of approaching dissolution.*

* See also *Lancet*, i., 387, 1908, and *British Medical Journal*, i., 495, 1908, for report of an address on “Nutmeg Poisoning,” by Prof. A. R. Cushny, M.D., F.R.S.

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