THE RELATION OF ALLERGY TO CHARACTER PROBLEMS IN CHILDREN: A SURVEY*

BY T. WOOD CLARKE, M. D., F. A. C. P., F. I. A. A.

Five years ago, a boy, 15 years of age, was referred to the writer by the late Dr. Richard H. Hutchings, past president of the American Psychiatric Association, and editor of THE PSYCHIATRIC QUARTERLY. The boy had been sent to him with the expectation of placing him in a state hospital for mental diseases.

This boy, previously happy and amenable, had, for three years, suffered from attacks of acute excitement in which he would rage around the house smashing china and furniture. The attacks lasted about 30 minutes and usually were followed by sleep. He had had five such outbreaks in the five weeks before I saw him. The family had come to the limit of their endurance and had decided that he was a subject for a mental hospital.

Dr. Hutchings, in taking his history, found the boy had had eczema as a child, and four years before had developed hay fever and asthma, which had lasted for two years. He had had no symptoms of allergic diseases for the two years before he was seen. However, as Dr. Hutchings was interested in the work the present writer had done in Dr. Hutchings’ hospital on allergy in epileptics, and had published an article of the writer’s on “Allergy of the Central Nervous System,” he referred the boy for examination.

Physical and neurological findings were not significant. The first day’s testing, however, showed 4+ reactions to oats and wheat. Later he reacted to feathers, fall pollens, cat dander, house dust, and slightly to other foods than oats and wheat. Oats and wheat were removed from his diet; and desensitization inoculations were given later for the inhalants.

The results of removing the oats and wheat from the diet were dramatic in the extreme. Almost overnight the boy’s entire character changed. From being unhappy and apprehensive he became, in a very few days, happy and co-operative. He has had no outbreaks of temper for five years. He is friendly and full of fun. He is now doing well in college. The case may also be cited of a woman who had been admitted to Marcy (New York) State Hos-

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pital some dozen times for episodic mental disorder and who at last said that she thought this was in some way associated with her asthma. She gave a strong reaction to dog hair and had an exacerbation of her psychiatric condition when a dog was brought on the ward. There is also the case of the morose boy, who had been expelled from four schools as incorrigible, who cleared up emotionally when the foods to which he was allergic were eliminated, got good marks in school and became an enthusiastic Boy Scout. These set the writer to wondering whether some of the mental changes which occur in what we designate as problem children might not be the direct result of an allergic cerebral edema such as we get in migraine and epilepsy of allergic origin, or might be the result of the chronic abnormal vasomotor activity of the cerebral vessels due to the repetitive allergic reaction resulting from eating some food, or breathing some inhalant, to which the problem child is allergic.

At the 1949 annual meeting of the American College of Allergists the matter was discussed with a number of the officers of the college. They were unanimously of the opinion that it was a subject worthy of systematic study. As the writer had been serving the college for five years as a member of the faculty of its instruction courses—as lecturer on allergy of the central nervous system—it was agreed that he should investigate the subject for a year and report his findings at the next meeting of the college in January 1950.

Very little attention has been paid in the medical literature to the relations of allergy to character. The first extensive articles on the subject were written in 1922 and 1924 by W. Ray Shannon so long ago that allergy is referred to as anaphylaxis and the allergic diseases as sequels of the exudative diathesis. He described four children with allergic diseases and the "neurotic diathesis," one with an allergic history, no present allergic symptoms, but great restlessness, and two with marked nervousness but no other manifestations or history of allergy, all of whom gave positive skin tests to foods. All seven of these lost all nervous symptoms as soon as the offending foods were removed from their diets.

Brief mention is made of psychological changes in allergic patients in articles by Hoobler, Kahn, Duke, Randolph, Clarke, Rowe and Winkelman and Moore, and more recently in the splen-