

Brown (Buck) Ticknor, Esq.

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TREATMENT AND CURE

OF

CRÉTINS AND IDIOTS;

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BY BUCKMINSTER BROWN, M. D.

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with Buckminster Brown's respects

THE  
TREATMENT AND CURE  
OF  
CRÉTINS AND IDIOTS;  
WITH AN  
ACCOUNT OF A VISIT  
TO THE  
INSTITUTION ON THE ABENDBERG,  
CANTON OF BERNE, SWITZERLAND,  
DURING THE SUMMER OF 1846.

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By BUCKMINSTER BROWN, M. D.

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## P R E F A C E .



THE following short article, which is now republished by the request of several gentlemen who are much interested in the subject to which it relates, was written during the early part of the last winter. Since then, the author has rejoiced to learn that other minds were, about the same time, acting in the matter, and that it was agitated and excited some attention in our State Legislature. The efforts, at the last session, of many philanthropists, well known in Boston and its vicinity, have been so far crowned with success, that a Committee was appointed to ascertain the number of idiots in our commonwealth, together with their situation and prospects.

From the report of this Committee, we now learn that in 171 towns, containing an aggregate population of 345,285 souls, there are found to be 543 who have received in the community to which they belong the name of idiots, and are treated as such. Of these, 204 are males, 339 females. If there is a proportionate number in the towns from which no returns have as yet been received, the aggregate in this State will be more than 1000.

Those who have been in the habit of travelling or residing in any of our country towns, together with those of Vermont or

New Hampshire, must have been strongly impressed, as I have often been, with the number which are to be thus met, scattered over various parts of the country.

The fact, however, of the existence of so large a class of these unfortunate beings in the single State of Massachusetts could scarcely have been expected even with such opportunities for more extended observations, and will open the eyes of many whose attention has never before been turned in this direction.

When their true character and condition shall have been revealed, and when the way shall have been pointed out for their amelioration, and even cure, then will the importance of the subject for the first time be fully appreciated.

BOSTON, SEPT. 23d, 1847.

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IN consequence of the great and constantly increasing interest which has been manifested by the public mind, throughout the civilized world, in regard to the treatment of the insane, and the resulting amelioration in their condition, the attention of the humane has been attracted towards that still more unfortunate class in whom the intellectual functions, instead of being disordered, have never been developed, or if developed at all, but in a very slight degree.

Aware that this subject had excited an interest in the minds of some of the benevolent in *our* community as well as elsewhere, and that when once such interest was awakened, it would not be allowed to sleep until something had been effected, I have felt that even the slightest information that could be obtained in regard to it might prove of importance, and would serve to hasten that day when the most wretched and uncared-for class of beings in existence shall be raised from their situation as outcasts from society, scarcely elevated above the brutes, and receive that atten-

tion and care to which, as members of the human family, they are so fully entitled.

Such were the considerations which induced me, previous to a recent absence in Europe, to note this among my memoranda of objects which would deserve a share of my attention. That I have accomplished much in this respect I cannot boast, but it has occurred to me that a short sketch of my visit to the Hospital for the Cure and Education of Crétins, on the Abendberg, Canton of Berne, Switzerland, together with a few remarks upon the subject, may not be without interest to some of your readers.

This institution is situated in the midst of the higher Alps, upon a height elevated 3,000 feet above the level of the sea, surrounded by scenery which excels in beauty and majesty any which can be met with elsewhere, even in Switzerland.

It was on a most beautiful afternoon in July that, with one companion, I ascended from the village of Interlachen to the summit of the Abendberg. The winding path by which the ascent is made is extremely steep and difficult, and so encumbered with rolling stones and decaying leaves, that the horses we had obtained in the village below were of but little service to us, as we preferred trusting ourselves to our own feet rather than even the cautious step of these mountain bred animals.

Notwithstanding the fatigue, I felt, on arriving at the top, that I was fully rewarded for my exertions. We were received with extreme politeness by Dr. Juggenbuhl, the founder and conductor of the institution, and the scene which presented itself to us, was one of the most curious, interesting, and impressive I think I ever witnessed.

A little band of children, as strange in appearance as in manners, were gathered upon one of the terraces overlooking the valley and commanding one of the most glorious views which the world can present. If any external influ-



ences can elevate and ennoble the torpid soul, and can awaken its dormant powers, they are such as are met with here. The sunny valley, with the picturesque village of Interlachen, the lakes of Brienz and Thun lay at our feet, encircled by lofty mountains, of which the snow-covered Jungfrau, Eiger, Monch, and Faulhorn were the most striking.

The exhilarating mountain air, combined with gymnastic exercises, together with the mental effect produced by the scenes in the midst of which they live, are, as we shall presently see, among the remedies upon which Dr. J. places much dependence for accomplishing the cure of the imbecile minds and feeble bodies which are placed under his charge.

I had much conversation with this gentleman upon the treatment he pursued, and the degree of success which attended his efforts. The untiring perseverance, energy, and patience, which are necessary to command a favorable result in the task which he has undertaken, can only be realized by those who have themselves observed these qualities there put in practice.

And in this connection I cannot forbear mentioning the manner — at once illustrating that benevolence of heart and quickness of perception which could alone have prompted, and given origin to the undertaking — in which his attention was first drawn to the subject.

“Called upon some years since,” he says in his report, “to investigate a malignant disease which, from time to time, infested some of the beautiful valleys of the higher Alps, I saw an old crétin, who was stammering a half-forgotten prayer, before an image of the Virgin, at Seedorf, in the canton of Uri. This sight excited my feelings in favor of these unhappy creatures, and fixed my vocation. A being still capable of conceiving the thought of God is worthy of every care and every sacrifice. These individuals of

our species, these debased brothers, are they not more worthy of our interest than those races of animals which we labor to make perfect? It is in such charitable efforts, and not in vain formulas, that consists that divine love taught us by Jesus Christ." . . . "It is all important, then, that a practical experiment should be tried. Much has been already written upon this subject, but little has been done. A chain of remarkable circumstances fixed my choice upon the Abendberg."\*

Such was the origin of this singular and unique institution.

That it was within the bounds of possibility that sooner or later some means should be discovered for rendering back to society and usefulness a portion of the human race so sunken below everything that characterizes humanity, is a proposition to which all will readily concede who have watched the progress of events in other respects, — who have seen the insane loosed from their chains, their dungeons and their cages thrown open, and those, who have been considered in former times as having a mark set upon their brow by the finger of God, and who have been treated with a harshness and brutality in accordance with this belief, brought back within the pale of humanity, and receiving that kindness and consideration which their afflicted condition so imperatively demands. None, let me repeat, who have seen the obstacles overcome in the education of the deaf, the dumb, and the blind, or who have seen individuals deprived by nature of all these senses together, gifted with a means of communicating with their fellow beings, and restored to the enjoyments and delights of

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\* "L'Abendberg, Etablissement pour la Guérison et l'Education des Enfants Crétins."

"Premier Rapport, par le Dr. Juggenbuhl, Member et Correspondant de la Société Helvétique des Sciences Naturelles, de la Société Impériale et Royale des Médecins, de Vienne, et de la Société Physico-médicale d'Erlangen."

companionship, would ever feel willing to deny that such a fate might also be in store for the so-called idiot.

I say the so-called idiot, for I have reasons for believing that this is a term which should not be indiscriminately applied, and that there is a marked distinction to be made between those to whom the epithet is truly applicable, and those who, on the continent of Europe, are known under the name of *crétins*. The former, are, in comparison, rarely met with in any part of the world; while the latter term, so far from being appropriate alone to a certain number of poor wretches who are to be found only in some of the dark and damp valleys of Switzerland, may be much more widely extended, and among their number may be ranked the numerous individuals who are to be found scattered over every country, and who, under various names, such as innocents, simpletons, or idiots, are to be met with in the valleys of Vermont, New Hampshire, or Scotland, as well as in Switzerland.

The great majority of these have all the physiological and psychological characteristics of the *crétin*. They have in common, as has been said by another writer when describing the *crétin*, every element of intellect.

“Ce qui manque à l'idiot [*crétin*] ce n'est ni la perception distincte, ni la sensation interne, ni la sensation externe, ni l'attention, ni la comparaison, ni le jugement, ni l'entendement propre, ni la prévoyance, ni les goûts, ni les désirs, ni les affections personnelles; l'idiot [*crétin*] fait acte, dans des limites, restreintes, il est vrai, de toutes les facultés dites intellectuelles; ce qui lui manque, c'est la liberté nécessaire pour appliquer ces facultés à l'ordre des faits moraux et abstraits, c'est la synergie, la spontanéité d'où jaillit la volonté morale.”\*

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\* *Traitement Moral, Hygiène, et Education des Idiots et des autres Enfants arriérés ou retardés dans leur développement, agiles de Mouvements involontaires, &c. &c.* Par Edouard Séguin.

If then, this is true, if *crétin* is a term which will admit of such wide application, and if he does in general possess most of these qualities, or even if individual cases do occur in which slight traces of but one or two of them are to be found, yet upon these scarcely discernible sparks of intellectual life must hang the hopes of the philanthropist, and to kindle these into a flame is to be the object of all his efforts. In many cases he will find that these qualities *are* wanting, that the hearing is obtuse, the taste gone, the sensation dull, perception scarcely apparent, — that it is almost impossible to fix the attention, and that in some cases, even that single instrument, the faculty of imitation, which is the last to leave them, is so overcome by physical as well as intellectual lassitude as to induce an opposition to all solicitation, and to all foreign incitements; yet even these obstacles have been found to give way before unwearied perseverance.

But the question will naturally be asked, how is this possible? how is the commencement to be made when every avenue is closed? There is but one way of commencing, and that is by expanding the physical powers, by strengthening them, and by removing, as far as possible, (and it *can* be done by slow degrees,) the physiological incumbrances which prevent the admission of ideas to the imprisoned spirit.

In the first place, there must be entire change of scene and air; the subject must be removed from the unwholesome atmosphere of the low valley, wherein the disease is generated, to the mountain heights; there he is constantly imbibing an impalpable remedy, — for such does the atmosphere in truth become to one who has never before breathed it in its purity. In the next place he must use gymnastic exercises, by which the frame is invigorated, and the lethargic energies aroused. These are all important agents, without which nothing need be attempted. To

them, of course, are added the other hygienic auxiliaries, good and wholesome food, frequent bathing, the douche, and friction. Dr. J. also makes much use of electro-magnetism; this he employs month after month, with decided benefit. He mentions one case, in which the nervous system was so enfeebled, that for the space of six months the patient was completely insensible, even to the very powerful action of this agent. After that time he began to feel it, and was soon susceptible to its slightest touch.

The organs of the senses are then exercised, and colors, sound, and chemical agents are employed. A "*cornet acoustique*" is often introduced into the ear, a word is uttered which strikes more forcibly upon the dull sense, while at the same time the child is made to observe the inflexions of the lips and tongue necessary to its pronunciation; knitting, sewing, and the composition of words, by means of large wooden letters, are, in course of time, acquired.

Moral means are of vast importance — gentleness, kindness and affection.

Dr. Juggenbuhl particularly mentioned as a circumstance, from its singularity, well worthy of attention, the *saccade*; — the sudden leap; — by which, when month after month of unmitigated effort on the part of the teacher has elapsed without his receiving the slightest encouragement, or sign indicative that his labors are to be crowned with success, the darkened intellect will often, in truth, almost always, reach the light.

It would seem, from his description, as if these exertions had gradually, and by imperceptible degrees, penetrated the obscurity, until at last a slight opening had been made, and a sudden flood of light admitted, permitting the soul to act with a clearness the more striking from the contrast with the thick cloud which had previously enveloped it.

After many long and weary trials, unexpectedly the

child will find his speech; at another leap some simple idea will make entrance, and the task thus far accomplished, the foundation is laid upon which is built the whole after superstructure. "When once," says Dr. Berchtold-Beaupré, "he [Dr. Juggenbuhl] has seized the end of the thread, he unrols it with infinite precaution that it may not be broken, until there is finally multiplied, out of the bosom of the intellectual obscurity, a series of fruitful images."

Dr. Juggenbuhl drew my attention to the form of the cranium, the characteristics of which, and of the bones generally, as also of the features, strongly indicate the scrofulous origin of the malady.

Crétinism is likewise often combined with paralysis.

He then spoke of idiotism (he has three or four idiots in his establishment), and of the signs by which it may be distinguished from crétinism, with which, he says, it should by no means be confounded. He pointed out a pretty little girl sitting among the rest, idly turning over a drum, and compared her to the crétins by whom she was surrounded. The little girl was of a beautiful form, with delicate, regular features, good complexion, with just a becoming tinge of red upon her cheek. In her eye there was nothing that indicated her dreadful infirmity. Yet this child was an idiot as hopeless as such a case could be; although, as applied to children, hopeless is a word scarcely, I believe, to be found in Dr. J.'s vocabulary.

There has a slight, very slight change for the better taken place even in this case; some perceptible improvement, the consequence, probably, of the alteration in her outward circumstances. It is in this that consists the real difference between the wretch, be it idiot or crétin, brought up in poverty and filth, uncared for, and almost completely abandoned, whom we see groveling upon the ground, or ranging at large along the roadsides, and that one, whose

parents being in a better condition, is more decent in appearance and behavior, exciting feelings of pity rather than of disgust. Now compare the class of which this little girl is a type, with the child afflicted with crétinism.

In the latter, it is disease of the framework, it is the external avenues which are closed; in the former, it is almost unchangeable mental conformation. Or, more properly speaking, in the latter, it is an altered condition of the nerves, sensitive and motor, and of their peripheral ramifications; in the former, it is to the great nervous centre alone that the evil is to be traced.

Fortunately, the latter is the rule; the former is the exception. The latter is to be found in almost every country; the former is, in comparison, rarely met with. Such is the conclusion to which Dr. Juggenbuhl has arrived, as the result of his extended experience.

Crétinism is undoubtedly one of the numerous forms in which scrofula manifests itself. It occurs in that variety of temperament which has been denominated the bilious or torpid; in children of dark complexion, short neck, large head, dilated pupils, who have tumid abdomen, and are generally of a lax and spongy fibre. Some of the external signs of a scrofulous diathesis may be found upon the idiot, and they are such as indicate the sanguine or irritable temperament, and in him the ravages of this disease are much less apparent. Look at the head; it is well shaped, or, instead of being too large, with a disproportioned protuberance of the occiput, it is too small, and gives us the idea of compression; and the features, they are well formed;—such are some of the chief distinctions. There is also a difference in the moral qualities. The idiot is often peevish and malicious, constantly doing injury to his companions, without provocation, striking, pinching, pulling their hair, or something of the kind. Of this we witnessed an example even in the innocent looking

little girl before us, who, suddenly leaving her drum, jumped forwards and struck another little girl who was standing near, with her back turned towards her. In this respect, the true crétin is totally different. They may have occasional bursts of anger when provoked, but, in general, they are kind and amiable in their disposition, not mischievous, not malicious, but affectionate and easily won to place confidence in those by whom they are well treated, and will fondle about them like a dog receiving the caresses of his master. This particularly attracted my notice; for by a few kind words and gestures, I had quickly three or four of them around me, smiling and playing with the buttons of my coat, climbing on my knee, and, by their mute, yet winning confidence, giving rise to a strong feeling of pity and commiseration.

My attention was drawn to one of the most truly painful cases that I ever met with. It was that of a beautiful little English girl, who was led or rather carried across the terrace by one of the assistants. Partial paralysis of both the lower limbs was evident at the first glance. But the mind was in a yet more paralyzed condition than the body.

This child was nine years of age. At an early period, she had evinced that quickness of intelligence, that vividness of perception, that aptness at acquiring, which parents so delight to see in their children, and which they hold as the dawning of superior genius, and all this in an uncommon degree.

The happy mother left nothing undone for the intellectual cultivation of her child. The faster she acquired, the more she was urged, and still urged, until at last, drawn too tight, the silver cord was loosened, the tender plant, forced beyond its strength, was blighted in the bud. The overtaxed mental powers reacted upon the physical, and the child became paralyzed and an idiot. From the paralysis, it was, thanks to the judicious treatment here received,



gradually recovering; but in regard to the mind, Dr. J. seemed to entertain but little hope. There she stood, with her glossy chestnut hair flowing in the wind, her mild blue eyes and fair complexion, a beautiful picture, and yet one of complete mental imbecility; her glance was wandering and vacant, and her fingers were scarcely ever removed from her mouth. She had evidently been the idol of her parents, and from her beauty and intellectual endowments, had well deserved to be so.

Crétinism, in Switzerland, is often found in close companionship with goitre; removal from the injurious influences to which both equally owe their origin, is, as I have before observed, the first indication to be complied with.

Among many interesting cases, the histories of which are given in the report, one of the most remarkable is that of Dr. Odet, at the present time a practising physician in one of the valleys of Switzerland. He was himself a crétin, and he selected crétinism as the subject of his dissertation when examined at Montpellier for the degree of Doctor of Medicine.

In this dissertation, which was published, he relates his own case and that of his youngest brother.

He says: "It was by following these curative means, that a learned physician, whom I am proud to own as a near relation, has been enabled to replace me in the rank of man." . . . "It was also by fortifying the physical system, that we were enabled to develop, little by little, the intelligence of my youngest brother, who, while still at the breast, was separated from his mother by order of the physician. Although he was frequently visited by his friends, crétinism secretly seized upon his intellectual faculties, under the mask of some of the maladies incident to childhood. It was during one of these visits, that his parents, much to their consternation, made the discovery of the danger that menaced him. They set everything to

work, but the evil had already taken profound root. He was in the second stage. Time and patience were necessary. They were not discouraged, and at the age of eight years, he commenced to make himself understood; at nine, he articulated some entire phrases; and at eleven, he was fitted to enter an academy."

"Crétinism," remarks a writer to whom we have previously referred,\* "attaches itself to the body and the soul simultaneously; the treatment should be at once physical and psychical. There is a double indication to fulfil; to place the material form under the command of the mind, and to render to the mind the use of its faculties, and so awaken its sensibilities that the voice of conscience may be heard and respected. It is in the external world that we must seek those agents which answer to the first indication; education will fulfil the second. The establishment on the Abendberg proposes to itself this double end. M. Juggenbuhl places, with reason, the source of the evil in the organs generally; and, following his method, the initiative treatment belongs to physical education and general therapeutics."

The following cases, also taken from the reports, will be read with interest.

M. S. was two years of age when admitted into the institution, which was in the month of May, 1841. There was in this case complete physical prostration; the muscles were relaxed; the head hung like that of a newly born infant; the skin was pale and cold to the touch; there was a scrofulous abscess in the neck, and the bones of the hand were softened and swollen. She was mute, but had a lively countenance. She soon began to smile at her nurse, and to notice some of the surrounding objects. At the expiration of two months, there was such a change in this young girl, that her mother, on making her a visit, did not at first recognize her.

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\* Dr. Berchtold-Beaupré, in his report to the Council of Health of the Canton of Freyburg.

A whole year, however, elapsed before she was enabled to walk. At the commencement of the winter, she learned to eat alone. At first, she articulated only the vowels; later, and with much difficulty, the consonants.

Speech came *suddenly*, after a long trial.

At four years of age, she could recite little prayers by heart, could knit and perform other light tasks.

She is now of a height and constitution entirely conformed to her age.

“Her parents are healthy and intelligent.”

“Elizabeth Z., of Berne, three years of age, was likewise born of healthy and intelligent parents. Her mother, however, during the year previous to the birth of Elizabeth, had suffered much from family troubles. Not many months afterwards her parents remarked that she would lay perfectly still, often with her tongue hanging out of her mouth, that she took no pleasure in anything, and that in other respects her health was much disordered. There was soon a complete stagnation of all her faculties. At the age of two years, she was two feet in height; her limbs were short and thick, without proportion; the epiphyses of the articulations of the hands were swollen, and there was saliency of the occiput. This child had babbled a few words, but, neglected by her parents, had become mute and had never learned to stand or walk.

“After a sojourn of two months on the Abendberg, she was able to walk, her digestion was corrected, but each attempt at instruction, or at play, caused her to utter plaintive cries. During nine months, her mind remained stationary; suddenly, she commenced to articulate words, to designate the parts of the body, and to become developed in all respects.”

Crétins present many examples of sudden and rapid improvement. It is this which, by offering the most powerful inducement possible to unremitting and prolonged perseverance, should prevent a too early abandonment of treatment. Such efforts are often crowned with success after many months have elapsed.

“Martin D., of Freyburg, was five years of age on his

entrance. His parents were healthy, but they inhabited the lower part of the town, which was subject to crétinism; one of his brothers was also a crétin. Martin was very tardy in learning to hold up his head, to stand, and to walk. The glands of the neck are swollen. He has strabismus. His tongue is thick, and he has the rudiments of goitre. Martin soon learnt the letters of the alphabet, and to pronounce little phrases. But his memory was so feeble, that he often would forget on one day, that which he had learnt the day previous. An exercise much prolonged could alone remedy this evil.

His physical strength progressed equally with his moral. His complexion is now animated, and has the tint of health; his step is firm, and his body robust; thanks to gymnastic exercises and good air. He can already read and write a little, and distinguish colors."

"Numerous examples prove that the infant crétin, although infected from his birth by this morbid disposition, and with a manifest tendency still to degenerate, can, notwithstanding, be restored to society by early and suitable treatment.

We have observed: First, That *many* learn to speak and receive religious and moral ideas.

Secondly, That some learn to read and write.

Thirdly, That still others become able to learn a trade, and particularly to apply themselves to agricultural and domestic labors.

The two first years of life are the epoch the most favorable for entrance into the institution. In regard to those who are older, the degree of cure and of development will be commensurate with their energy and their capacity to articulate sounds."

The total number of patients that had been treated at the institution up to the date of the report was thirty. Six of these had been restored to the normal development of childhood; sixteen are still under treatment; six, idiots

rather than crétins, have been returned to their homes in an ameliorated bodily condition; and two are dead. Cré-tinism almost universally makes its appearance in the second year, and from three to six are in general necessary to effect a cure. If, however, it is attacked at its very commencement, this result is often obtained in from one to two years.

Such are the principles, such the method, and such the result of this noble experiment, first thoroughly tested on the summit of the Abendberg.

Within a few years, a similar institution has been established in Paris, and I have understood that other of the European governments are preparing to follow the example thus set them, by the foundation, within their own dominions, of asylums devoted to the same philanthropic purposes.





