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EDITORIALS

NEONATAL SCIATIC PALSY

In this number of the Journal an important contribution is made by Fahrni of Vancouver who reports eleven infants born with sciatic palsy. He suggests that the nerve lesions might have arisen from the pressure of a foetal hand on the sciatic nerve trunk. His paper was received for publication nearly two years ago, and when it was discussed by members of the British Editorial Board, as every paper is discussed in great detail, his conclusions were hotly contested. It may be said that the paper should nevertheless have been published forthwith, and that possible errors of conclusion could still have been corrected by later correspondence; but, rightly or wrongly, the Editorial Board did not take this view. Publication was delayed until experimental studies had been completed in the Departments of Physiology and Pharmacology of the University of Liverpool, together with further investigations at the Liverpool hospital where Fahrni was working at the time of his report. We now record the results of these studies by O'Malley, McCandless and Hudson, reported by McFarland as an addendum to Fahrni’s paper. They suggest that no matter how remote the umbilical cord may seem to be from the sciatic nerve, the real cause of neonatal sciatic palsy is the injection of noxious drugs into the umbilical artery.

Meanwhile a paper by Mills of Birmingham, in which reference is made to Fahrni’s cases at the Walton Hospital, has been published in the British Medical Journal (August 27, 1949). Mills described eight cases of neonatal sciatic palsy seen in the Birmingham Maternity Hospital. He attributed the paralysis to the injection of “nithamide” into the umbilical cord and concluded that although the etiology of neonatal sciatic palsy was not yet proved, it seemed probable that “the lesions may be due to the injection of drugs into an artery in the umbilical cord,” thus supporting the conclusions of Liverpool workers whose studies were inspired by the shrewd observations of Mr Fahrni.

ON WRITING

In the last British number of the Journal, in an editorial article, we quoted the words of Alvarez of the Mayo Clinic: “There probably never was a good paper which was not worked over several or many times.” From the communications received, it is clear that many young contributors still believe that the art of writing is inborn in some and denied to others, and that whereas they themselves cannot write, some of their colleagues are able to sit down and compose fluent English without effort. How wrong they are! It was Dostoievsky who said: “And as for me this is my story: I worked and was tortured. You know what it means to compose? No, thank God, you do not.”

Nearly all good writing is torture to the writer. He must discipline himself to long-continued effort—writing, rewriting and rewriting yet again—always seeking to improve the turn of phrase and the choice of word, and with each successive transcript deleting much that was written before. Tolstoy said: “I cannot understand how anyone can write without rewriting everything over and over again.” Flaubert was no less honest in his admission: “I am going on very slowly. I give myself an accursed lot of trouble. I have just suppressed