

Insanity in British Guiana. By R. GRIEVE, M.D., Medical Superintendent, Public Asylum, British Guiana, Berbice.*

From the short time at my disposal, and from not having beside me the complete records of the asylum, my remarks to-day must necessarily be more limited in their scope and desultory in their character than under other circumstances would have been the case. I must content myself with bringing before you, in a very general way, some facts relating to the proportion of insane amongst the different races and people which go to make up the much diversified population of British Guiana, and I may notice also a few of the more prominent forms of insanity seen in that colony. What I have to say may, I trust, possess sufficient novelty to be interesting, and may prove none the less suggestive, although its object be not to support any preconceived or pet theory. British Guiana, although a West Indian Colony, forms part of the mainland of the Continent of South America, and amongst its inhabitants is seen a diversity of races as great, if not greater, than in any other country of like extent. There are two large primary divisions into which the population may be separated, namely, those born in the colony—in local phraseology called creoles—and immigrants. In 1871, the date of the last census, the population of the country numbered 218,909, consisting of 103,775 creoles and 115,134 immigrants. Neither in these numbers nor in any subsequent calculations are the aboriginal Indians (bucks) included, who inhabit the interior of the Colony, and who do not supply any contingent to its known insane population. The first division or creoles comprises a very large population of blacks of fine negro blood, descendants of the local slaves of pre-liberation days and of black immigrants subsequently brought from Africa or the neighbouring West Indian islands. In this class are to be found the greatest number of the coloured people of mixed African and European extraction in various degrees of combination, with a few white creoles of pure European descent. Amongst the immigrants are included, firstly, the black and

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coloured people who have come from the other West Indian colonies, chiefly from Barbadoes; secondly, negroes born in Africa imported as free labourers, and who mostly belong to the West Coast tribes; thirdly, many East Indians (coolies) brought under indenture to work as labourers on the sugar estates; fourthly, a good number of Chinese, introduced for the most part under similar circumstances; fifthly, Portuguese who have come from Madeira and the Cape de Verde Islands; and, lastly, a comparatively small proportion of Europeans.

The asylum with which I am connected is the only one in the Colony, and the number of insane under treatment there furnishes the sole record we have of the prevalence of mental diseases. From the data thus supplied can be calculated with approximate accuracy the population of insane amongst the different races, and the results thus obtained are striking. Taking the two great divisions of creoles and immigrants we find that the former yield a population of less than one per 1000 ($\cdot 95$), whilst amongst the latter it is over one and a-half per 1000 ($1\cdot 60$). Thus it would seem that mental diseases prevail more extensively amongst the visitors than in the native inhabitants of the place. The thorough change in the condition of life to which the immigrant is subjected may be taken by some as a sufficient explanation of the difference here noted. For myself I am inclined to give much weight to the greater likelihood there is that insane immigrants of the quiet class, destitute, as in many cases they are, of relatives or friends, find their way to the asylum in greater numbers than the corresponding creoles who have their families near them. There are still more striking differences to be found in the proportion of insane amongst the various classes of immigrants who, with the exception of the Europeans—and it may be the Portuguese—live pretty much under similar conditions. I shall give the numbers of these, and then draw attention to one or two points in connection with them. Of natives of Barbadoes and other West Indian islands there are in the Colony 21,523—proportion of insane $1\cdot 44$ per 1,000; of Africans, 7,541, giving a proportion of $3\cdot 18$; East Indians, 63,846, proportion $1\cdot 50$; Portuguese, 13,032, proportion $1\cdot 30$; Chinese, 7,098, proportion $2\cdot 11$; Europeans, &c., 9,094, proportion $0\cdot 90$. Amongst this number it will be seen that there is a great excess in the proportion of the insane found

amongst the Africans, and that the proportion amongst the Chinese is high, while amongst those of European extraction it is very low. The last fact may, I think, be accounted for by the circumstance that very few of the European insane are retained in the Colony; they are mostly sent to Europe to their friends. The very great number of lunatics found amongst the Africans appears to me to carry some significance as bearing upon the question of the connection existing between civilisation and the prevalence of insanity. Those people born and living during their earlier years in Africa belong most certainly to the race which possesses less of civilisation than any other seen in the Colony. Yet they send to the asylum more of their number than any other. The significance of this fact depends in great measure on the belief which may be held as to the influence of the hereditary element in the production of insanity. Believing, as I do, the inheritance of the insane predisposition to be a great, even an essential, factor in the evolution of mental disease, I hold that the statement now made militates against the belief that high civilisation brings the cause of insanity in its train.* Vice is a more active agent in the manufacture of the insane neurosis than even "mental strain;" and however little of the latter may fall in the way of the "noble savage," he is no stranger to the former. On the other hand, I can easily see that the complete change of the local conditions under which the individual is placed by his removal from an entirely savage life to one having the comparatively high civilisation of a British Colony, imperfect as that may be, yields sufficient explanation to any one who believes in the greater potency of the causes acting on the person himself, and ascribes less to the sins of his forefathers. Amongst the different nationalities, the type of insanity which exists varies much. Race distinctions do not disappear on coming to the asylum. I shall briefly notice a few of the more striking points in this connection. One which has already been brought to public notice, in an article published some years ago in the *Journal*, written by Dr. Donald, is the large proportion of epileptics amongst the

* It is evident, however, that none of the facts mentioned are sufficiently conclusive to help to determine this question one way or the other. Dr. Grieve himself accounts for the apparent number of insane among the Africans, and for the smaller number of European insane. There is, therefore, no evidence whatever to disprove the position that civilized peoples are more liable to insanity than uncivilized.—[Eps.]

Chinese in the asylum. Speaking from memory, I should say that eight out of every ten of our Chinese patients are epileptic. Amongst the negroes mania is the form most usually seen; here may be noted the absence amongst this race of suicidal tendencies. The black people as a class are not suicidal; I have no recollection of suicide having been committed by a black, sane or insane, in the Colony during my residence there. On the other hand, the tendency to self-murder is very marked amongst the Chinese—a Chinese labourer on the sugar estates will often hang himself for what seems to us a very trivial cause—and in the asylum they give more trouble on this account than any other class of inmates. The East Indian is more suicidal in his tendencies than the blacks, but not so markedly so as the Chinese. There is also less dread of homicide with us than in an English asylum. The anger of the negro when insane is very quickly raised, but, as a rule, it as quickly subsides. We see very little of that fixed determination to injure—that brooding over imagined wrongs and watching for an opportunity for revenge, common enough here in the insane. Amongst the East Indians, a quiet, low melancholia is the most common form, but they also suffer from mania, in which the attacks, as a rule, are shorter, and the patients more manageable than with the blacks. There is one form of mania very markedly shown amongst the negroes, natives of Africa, which is characterised by a strong desire to hide themselves from human sight. If out of the asylum they will run into the bush and remain there until they starve, and in the asylum the same tendency shows itself. Amongst the Portuguese insanity is of the European form. There is one other circumstance to be noticed, and that is the absence of general paralysis. Amongst more than six hundred patients under treatment since I have been in the Colony, there has only been one case—that, however, was a very marked one. He was a creole of the Colony, but claimed to be of pure European descent. His father was a Scotchman and his mother a creole. There is also a striking freedom from any form of paralysis. Amongst the 310 patients who were in the asylum when I left there was not a single paralytic confined to bed. Before closing, there is connected with another subject an observation which I shall very shortly bring to the notice of this Society, and that is one referring to the relative weight of different portions of the

brain. It is, I believe, generally assumed that the relative weights of the different parts of the brain do not possess any significance as indicating race. Amongst Europeans, if there be any difference in the weight of the two halves of the cerebrum, the left is the heavier. Since I have been in the West Indies I have had the opportunity of examining over two hundred brains of sane and insane. I have found that whilst amongst the East Indian, the preponderance of weight is on the left side of the cerebrum, the opposite is the case amongst the negroes, and very markedly so—in the vast majority of cases the right half is heavier than the left; in some the two sides are equal, and very rarely, indeed, does the left weigh more than the right, and then from the effects of evident disease. When I began to realise this fact, I naturally set myself to look for some explanation of it, and as naturally first thought of prevalent left-handedness, but my search after left-handed blacks was not a very successful one, as I did not find a single specimen. Then another idea struck me, which I now submit to you, not as an explanation but as the very faintest suggestion in that direction. Of all the observations made in connection with the important subject of the localisation of the functions of the brain in its various parts, that which places the organ of speech in the left hemisphere is the one most universally accepted. May there not be some connection between the undeveloped left hemisphere of the African and his primitive and simple language?

I have again to apologise to the Society for the desultory character of my remarks, and to express my regret that having been so much and continuously occupied with the important and necessary administrative work connected with extensive changes made in the asylum, I have been prevented from bringing these subjects to the notice of the profession in a more exact and scientific form, but this, I trust, it may be in my power at some future time to do.