SUGGESTION: AN IMPORTANT FACTOR IN MENTAL DISEASE

GEORGE EDWARD CLARK, M.D.

To one who has watched the practice of medicine for even a few years there must come a conviction that there are fads and fashions in medicine as in other lines of work. One sees, too, that with the advent of something new, either a remedy or a method of treatment, the old and tried is often well nigh forgotten.

Many years later, perhaps, the old method is revived and poses again as new. Many instances of this might be mentioned. There comes to mind Hippocrates's treatment of pleural effusions, especially empyemas, by tapping. This passed entirely out of use for generations to be revived almost within the memory of men now living. The writer, some thirty years ago, was present at a meeting when the advantage of this method over the use of blisters and cupping was seriously questioned. The modern treatment of sprains revived through the efforts of Virgil S. Gibney of New York, possibly twenty years ago, is another instance.

The use of creosote in the cure of pulmonary tuberculosis, now quite out of fashion, is further evidence of this folly. No doubt the most ancient and at the same time the most universal therapeutic agent known to man is the power of suggestion. Were it not impossible for man to escape from its inadvertent, not to say accidental use, one feels it would be thrown quite into the discard, by the modern psychiatrist. Has not the psychoanalyst proved that suggestion and hypnosis are both not only needless but even harmful upon occasion?

And surely, he who avails himself of the discoveries made by the psychoanalysts, but is yet unwilling to class himself among them, will not permit his reputation to be sullied by any reference to suggestion or hypnotism. No, that is taboo! It savors only of the charlatan!
However, is that wise, honest, or even commonly fair? For every hypnotic charlatan are there not one hundred medical fakers? Will you then withdraw your allegiance from legitimate medicine? Surely there have been and still are in the ranks of the psychotherapists men whose probity cannot be gainsaid.

It is claimed for psychoanalysis that no one will really understand it or appreciate its value unless he has himself been analyzed or has had actual experience in conducting an analysis and that no other can offer a really intelligent criticism.

This is undoubtedly correct and, the writer maintains, the same is true as to the influence and efficacy of suggestion, hypnotic or otherwise. Its truly enormous significance in the production of both health and disease becomes evident only after an intimate acquaintance with its use.

In looking back over thirty years of general practice nothing stands out as being so completely satisfactory and lasting as the cures made by psychotherapeutic methods. Moreover, one's most poignant regret is that because of actual lack of time, in that hurried life, one could thus help so few. Indeed, it was often one's last resort rather than one's first.

It is, no doubt, because of the actual lack of insight on the part of the average physician that he finds it difficult to credit the results which are claimed for psychotherapeutics.

It will, doubtless, be understood that this last remark refers to the direct treatment of a diseased condition by psychotherapy and not to the suggestive optimism which the enlightened physician constantly employs.

It is rather surprising to find not only the average physician but the average psychiatrist unaware of the wide range of efficacy covered by psychotherapy. Another surprise is the prevalence of the idea that such "cures" are not permanent. In the writer's experience they are among the most permanent and he feels quite sure that among "chronics" (the class most often coming under psychotherapeutic treatment) a far larger proportion return at intervals for the medicine than for the suggestion.

The writer hastens here to add that psychoanalysis should always come first, in analyzable cases, and often renders direct
suggestion unnecessary but psychoanalysis, in his view, is often wisely supplemented by synthetic suggestion and in an occasional case is actually needed to effect the cure.

A physician unaware of the efficacy of psychotherapy before the advent of psychoanalysis, would find the literature most interesting. There is a short history and a summary in Milne Bramwell’s book on hypnotism which is illuminating and authentic and would take but a little while to read.

Who so essays to treat many diverse abnormal conditions by suggestion alone, will need to keep himself in constant training, otherwise, the rapport so necessary for quick and efficient influence will not be established and maintained. The operator’s own attitude of mind has much to do with it. For him, “nothing succeeds like success” and, too, nothing fails like failure.

The one time masters in this field well understood this, and, in establishing their clinics, they invariably arranged for new patients to witness others under influence and treatment before they were themselves approached.

The advent of psychoanalysis, has, however, made available a method which is not only free from the restrictions and limitations of direct suggestion and hypnosis, but which can be carried out at any time in the quiet of one’s office, needing only the cooperation of the patient.

The object of this paper is not at all to advise a return to the old methods, except as a supplement to the new, but by emphasis on the extraordinary efficacy of suggestion to drive home the fact that every physician whether inadvertently or not, is constantly using a most potent influence for good or evil, as the case may be, and should not only keep that fact in mind, but intentionally minimize the evil and magnify the good.

The same fact should be impressed upon the nurse or attendant. There is much in the literature of this subject (as, for instance, in Sidis, Psychology of Suggestion) which goes to prove that in the ordinary waking condition a suggestion is accepted and carried out only as it is more or less indirect. This is an exceedingly important fact and one to be constantly kept in mind.

A suggestion to be of any avail, must be accepted by the
patient. In fact, it must be made an auto-suggestion on the part of the patient. It is completely proved that auto-suggestion is more powerful than suggestion from another. Where the two come in conflict, the auto-suggestion always prevails. Very well, then, it is the indirect or casual suggestion which most often impresses the patient because it does not excite his antagonism and consequent contrary auto-suggestion. To ask a depressed patient how he feels, is to call his attention to his woes and invite a recital of them. To then tell him, his ideas are mistaken and that he is really better is to court disaster. He will feel sure he is misunderstood and does not receive the requisite sympathy.

On the other hand, if one comments upon how much better the patient looks or remarks in a casual way that one is so pleased at his great improvement, the patient may declare his looks belie him, but just the same, he will, later, think there must be something in it or the doctor would not have noticed it. The direct statement, the patient is sure to think is prepared and will often remark "that is just the way you doctors always talk," etc. The casual remark, because of its unexpected nature, seems to him spontaneous and is accepted as such.

The physician is liable to forget or, perhaps, does not fully realize, that his word carries authority and conviction in proportion to the confidence he has inspired. It is quite usually his casual remark that carries most weight. The patient discounts the doctors ordinary optimistic talk. In his view, that is always done for effect. But the casual remark, that which appears to come spontaneously and without premeditation is what the doctor really thinks. There comes to mind a case where very high blood pressure, with a failing heart, valvular lesion and secondary kidney involvement had greatly improved under treatment. One day, when the patient came for examination, the physician listened to his heart a bit longer than usual and gave vent to the expression "h–m" without further comment. The patient went home, paced the floor all night and sent down his wife before breakfast the next morning to learn how long he might expect to live.
The physician had neglected to say that “h-m” meant surprise at his improvement. One cannot deal with mental cases without being constantly reminded of the evil brought about by adverse suggestion. He is pitifully blind who does not appreciate this. While it may seldom be the original causative factor, in the given case, it has nearly invariably entered in as a more or less constant means of aggravation and it is therefore something always in evidence, always to be dealt with either for evil or for good.

In considering this matter from the standpoint of occupational aides one is impressed with their opportunity for helpfulness. It is well always to look for the best in the patient; to show plainly one expects it. One’s statements should always be positive, never negative. Avoiding argument and denials as to the accuracy of the patient’s statements, one should point out that we are all guided too much by our feelings, which are notoriously misleading. The terms “do not,” “must not,” “try,” and the like, and all statements implying effort and difficulty should be studiously avoided. The standpoint should be maintained that the patient can do as he pleases—it is needful only for him to want to do what is desired. It is assumed he wants to get well and, therefore, he wishes to do what will help to that end. It is of exceeding importance to induce the patient to talk right. In talking, he is suggesting to himself. If he talks in terms of effort, so will he think and assuredly he will act as if the effort was needed. If he stresses his ailment as making his task impossible, one can agree that, of course, he thinks so, or he would not say it, but experience has proved we can all develop our latent powers and accomplish easily what has seemed impossible. That one often discovers real talent and unsuspected interests in this way, and doubtless he has something of this. Talk of this kind is not only indirect suggestion, but it is decidedly positive and will bring results.