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FIFTY YEARS AGO

Mustard gas and its implications

DEAR SIRS,—In reply to Messrs. John Eyre and Frank W Law may I state that I have seen one drop of 4 per cent solution of hyd. perchlor. in glycerine accidentally fall on the cornea and in a few seconds which elapsed before washing out the conjunctival sac, severe and lengthy, but not permanent damage was inflicted on almost the whole of the corneal epithelium. Here there was no question of absorption. I quite agree with them that in the field of biology there is nothing more misleading than the argument from analogy, which indeed led eminent men to assume and publish results on the assumption that because man could accommodate the mammals could also.

But the argument from analogy hardly applies in this instance just quoted.

As regards the late effects of mustard gas on the cornea, the few cases I have seen showed deep seated infiltration rather than ulceration and there was very little clear cornea left anywhere. So that I doubt whether either diathermy or contact glasses would

have assisted. If such cases, which I am glad to say are rare, present themselves, the method suggested will be borne in mind. It is true that these conditions do recur without obvious cause. No one will be more grateful than myself if the writers have devised an effective treatment of mustard gas in the field, and will look forward to their publication of their experimental results. But the practical use of any remedy of the kind in advanced positions of any army is very difficult but not insuperable.

Some idea of the difficulty of acting efficiently in advanced stations may be learnt from the Palestine campaign, where towards the end men with high temperature were given quinine at once, no matter what seemed to be the cause of the temperature. If the medical officers had waited until they could be sure that malaria was the cause it would at times have been too late. To neutralise the effects of mustard on the eyes, special instruction for the forward units will be a necessity. - Letter from James W Barrett.

Br J Ophthalmol 1941; 25: 95.



Fifty Years Ago

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