

New Facts Brought to Light on Rarely Discussed Lupus Disease

K. H. SUTHERLAND, M.D.
County Health Officer

Some of the various forms of lupus erythematosus have been known for more than 125 years, though the causes of the disease—often called L. E. or lupus—seem to be just about as obscure today as they ever were.

Hitherto unknown facts about the prolific manifestations of the disorder have been brought to light in recent years, and a good beginning in the conquest of this disease has been made. In certain of its forms, however, lupus erythematosus still remains a dreaded illness for which there is as yet no cure.

Lupus may appear as a chronic and mild skin disorder or as a severe disseminated systemic illness. Signs may therefore range from nothing more than small localized, circular skin lesions which may

never extend beyond the original site to an acute systemic illness that may involve many systems within the body.

THE SKIN lesions usually appear on the face or scalp and, over months or years, may slowly continue to extend with scarring visible in healed areas. Long-term treatment is usually necessary to halt progression of the lesions.

The acute systemic form of lupus is often very severe. Early symptoms include vague muscle and joint discomfort frequently followed by acute arthritis. Fever, weakness, nausea, and restlessness may occur early in the course of illness. It is in this acute phase that a skin lesion may develop across the bridge of the nose and the cheek bones—the distinctive butterfly rash formation associated with this disorder.

SYSTEMIC LUPUS erythematosus may also be subacute or chronic. It may persist for years, and new symptoms may occur from time to time as previously healthy systems within the body are affected. Periods of progression alternate with those in which the disease is seemingly quiescent, and, while the disease is apparently inactive, the patient may appear to be in reasonably good health, though easily fatigued and subject to feelings of bodily discomfort.

Lupus occurs chiefly, but not always, in young people and most frequently between the ages of 10 and 30. The chronic discoid form is uncommon in children; when it occurs, it is usually after puberty. The disease is about 10 times as frequent in females as in males. The importance of the hereditary factor is not known, though evidence suggests that there is

an increased incidence of the disorder in families. L.E. is not contagious in any of its forms.

IN YEARS PAST, the disease was frequently linked with tuberculosis or syphilis, but, after much trial and error, it is now grouped more often with the connective tissue diseases. Since connective tissue is so widely distributed within the body, the symptoms of illness that are produced depend in great measure on the body system that is most affected. As a result, lupus may be confused with many other diseases besides tuberculosis and syphilis, including those affecting the heart, joints, lungs, kidneys, or the central nervous system.

Not until 1948 was an abnormal blood cell identified in lupus patients. This L.E. cell phenomenon, together with a

serum L.E. factor, have provided a test which helps to confirm the diagnosis of the disease in most cases.

Cumulative evidence at hand indicates that lupus can no longer be considered a rare disease. This opinion, expressed in a leading medical journal, was based primarily on the results of work done at 2 of the major L.E. clinics in the United States; the Cleveland clinic in Cleveland, Ohio, and the Collagen Disease Clinic at the Los Angeles County General Hospital.

A 12-YEAR STUDY of 500 systemic lupus patients admitted to the Los Angeles clinic between 1950-61 reveals that the disease occurs in people as frequently as muscular dystrophy, cystic fibrosis, ulcerative colitis, or the more acute forms of leukemia. It is almost as frequent in occur-

rence as acute rheumatic fever.

The outlook for patients with systemic lupus erythematosus is much brighter than it was prior to 1950, when no more than 50 per cent of patients survived beyond the first two years of illness. Though the disease cannot yet be cured, certain drugs can hold it under control for long periods of time during which reasonably good health may be enjoyed.

Of all the passions, jealousy is that which exacts the hardest service and pays the bitterest wages.

—Charles Caleb Colton

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