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ON THE

EMPLOYMENT OF CHLOROFORM

IN

DENTAL SURGERY,

ITS MODE OF EXHIBITION, ETC.

BY

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EDINBURGH :

SUTHERLAND & KNOX, GEORGE STREET.

LONDON : SIMPKIN, MARSHALL, & CO.

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EXTRACTED FROM THE MONTHLY JOURNAL OF MEDICAL SCIENCE, FOR SEPTEMBER 1843.



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ON THE EMPLOYMENT OF CHLOROFORM.

(Read before the Medico-Chirurgical Society of Edinburgh.)

EARLY in November last, I extracted the first tooth ever drawn from a patient placed under the anæsthetic influence of chloroform. Since that period I have, in my practice as a dentist, used it now above 300 times, and without one single accident or drawback of any kind. And I have at this time been induced to lay before the Society the results of my experience in regard to its use, from having heard repeated accounts of the alleged total failure of this agent in dental surgery; and that, sometimes in the hands of men of extensive practice.

Let me merely premise, that I have tried chloroform manufactured by different chemists; but that supplied by Messrs Duncan and Flockhart is what I have found most pure, and most easy of inhalation. It is therefore that which I now constantly use.

I do not know if I have seen all the instruments that have been invented for the purpose of administering chloroform; but I have seen a very great number indeed, many of them very ingeniously contrived, chiefly with the object of preventing loss by the evaporation of chloroform; but, in general, they are so arranged, as to fit closely over the nose and mouth of the patient, and prevent his breathing a particle of air before it has passed through the apparatus—a point in which, I believe, there rests an insuperable objection to the use of all ordinary instruments; and I have not seen a single one that I could be induced to use in preference to the method first recommended by Professor Simpson, namely, that of a handkerchief.

It has the recommendation of being perfectly simple, convenient and easy of application, does not frighten the patient; and, what is best, it most effectually combines every requisite for perfect administration.

Some dentists among us are in the habit of placing two or three plies of cotton wadding within the folds of the handkerchief, for the purpose of preventing the chloroform from evaporating so rapidly as it otherwise would do, and keeping what they do employ concentrated in one small spot. Certainly they may, in this way, succeed in rendering their patient insensible with a minimum quantity,

the use of it is almost abandoned by the profession; and I am not surprised at such a result, for the greater quantity of chloroform manufactured there is made with naphtha, the smell of which distinctly remains in the preparation. I have sent up a good deal of what is made in this town to be tried there, and I am informed that it is a totally different article from what they have been attempting to use, and that the effect of ours is such as they were led to expect from the accounts published by Dr Simpson.

Now, I hold that chloroform is not accountable for patients being made sick and disgusted with all those mixtures that bear its name; and till gentlemen are careful, and do not use any except the pure article, we shall have many accounts of patients being riotous, sick, and ill, and, consequently, of medical gentlemen temporarily abandoning the use of it.

One very curious effect that I witnessed whilst administering chloroform to a patient whose intellect was very much impaired from some affection of the head, so as to leave her imbecile, was, that whilst under the influence of it, her eyes being open, her countenance lost the vacant expression habitual to it; and she looked round in my face with an intellectual expression, so calm and so rational that I was perfectly startled. Whilst gazing at her, however, the effects of the chloroform passed off, and she awoke with the same unmeaning laugh and vacant gaze that she had before. I mentioned this circumstance to my friend Dr Simpson the day that it occurred, and I thought of trying what effect the habitual use of the chloroform might have upon the patient by stimulating the brain so as to assist the cure; for this patient, I was informed by the parents, is gradually, though slowly, recovering the use of her faculties; and we do not know but that, by stimulating the brain, it might materially assist in the recovery; but I must leave this for others better acquainted with affections of this sort than I am, and recur to my own department.

As to the method I follow whilst my patients are recovering from the anæsthetic state, it is this—At first I allow the patient to remain quiet for half a minute or so, so as not to excite him—then the mouth being open (for it generally remains so after the gag is removed) I put a napkin quietly to it, to prevent the blood running down and destroying any part of the dress, and then merely fan the face briskly for a short time. The patient then opens his eyes, laughs, says, “Is it out?” or “That’s very odd!” and the whole scene is finished by his getting up and saying, that he will never suffer toothache again when he can get quit of it so easily. The advantage of the use of chloroform to the operator is as great as to the patient, as he can take more time to his operation than he formerly used to do when he knew that his patient was in an agony of anxiety, with all his courage screwed up to keeping his mouth open, his head steady, and his hands convulsively clutching “the horrid chair.”

In conclusion, I would beg to remark—

1st, That out of above 300 cases of dental surgery in which I have employed chloroform, I have never seen the least deleterious effect result from its use, but the reverse.

2d, I have seen or traced no after bad consequences of any kind whatever.

3d, I have seen no case in which I have been afraid to give, and where I have not given it quite successfully.

4th, It saves the patient's present physical suffering and previous struggles of feeling.

5th, It enables the dentist to perform his work with more satisfaction, certainty, and success.

6th, Patients, who have once had a tooth drawn under the influence of chloroform, invariably demand the repetition of the chloroform on requiring again the same operation.

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It is true, the patient's present physical suffering and previous
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