LETTER TO THE EDITOR

SIR

The present-day physician, whether interested in a specialty or not, is faced with two unpleasant alternatives. He can ignore completely what is being written and become quickly old-fashioned. He can, on the other hand, keep himself so busy with the newly published material that he has no time to eat, sleep, or work, and he becomes quickly extinct. Somewhere in between these two extremes, he tries to keep up with a lot of what is new and feels annoyed that so much of what is written seems highly esoteric, and/or impractical. He is at a continuous loss to decide which of the many published articles he can skip without missing the one important contribution of the week.

It is, therefore, at times refreshing and salutary to avoid the new journals and devote some recreational reading time to the writings of our professional colleagues of an earlier day. Preparing our background for a talk on modern dental anaesthesia, we strayed into contact with the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* of April 14, 1847, which we think might interest some of our present-day anaesthesiologists.

Several facets of the following quoted passages bear notice. They are brief. They avoid dogmatic conclusions. Keep shows a delightful originality. His contributions to the medical and dental history of the New England area warrant a far greater study than most of us have made. The contribution from Canada shows early in the history of anaesthesiology that Canadians are going to play their part as years roll by. The observation that people of intemperate habits make difficult patients for the anaesthetist is made here—probably, for the first time.

That three contributions on anaesthesia are included in a general medical magazine within six months of the original exhibition of the anaesthetic properties of diethyl ether is convincing evidence that our specialty of anaesthesia is as important as some of us believe. That so few of our present-day anaesthetists describe their experiences in the delightful way that Dr. Keep did is a pity!

The time spent in reading back through old journals is pleasantly spent, and develops a sense of proportion, and a respect for our antecedents which may profitably be co-ordinated with the latest research findings in order to make us better anaesthetists and better men.

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EXCERPTS FROM *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, April 14, 1847

The Letheon Administered in a Case of Labor (To the Editor of the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*)

Dear Sir,

On the 7th inst I administered the vapor of ether in a case of natural labor. The patient was in good health and in labor of her child. Five and a half hours having elapsed from the commencement of labor, her pains, which had been light, but regular, becoming severe, the vapor of ether was inhaled by the nose, and exhaled by the mouth. The patient had no difficulty in taking the vapor in this manner from the reservoir without any valvular apparatus.

In the course of twenty minutes four pains had occurred without suffering, the vapor of ether being administered between each pain. Consciousness was unimpaired and labor not retarded. Inhalation was then suspended, that a comparison might be made between the effective force of the throes with and without the vapor of ether. No material difference was detected, but the distress of the patient was great. Inhalation was resumed, but the progress of the labor was so rapid that time could not be found for sufficient inhalation to bring the system perfectly under its influence, still the sufferings of the last moments were greatly mitigated. From the commencement of the inhalation to the close of the labor, thirty minutes. Number of inhalations, five. No unpleasant symptoms occurred, and the result was highly satisfactory.

Yours,
N. C. Keep

Boston, April 10th, 1847

Inhalation of Sulphuric Ether in Surgical Operations

In devoting a considerable portion of this No. of our *Journal* to this subject, we feel that we are doing our readers essential service. Having now satisfied ourselves by actual experiment, that very painful operations can be performed while the patient is made insensible and unconscious by the inhalation of pure Sulphuric Ether, we entertain the opinion that a new era is about to dawn upon Surgery, produced by this important discovery. While we have been sceptical and are still so, with respect to the effects of Mesmerism in the alleviation of pain and disease, and hope ever to continue the uncompromising opponents to all species of quackery and patented remedial agents, we are free to admit our convictions concerning the value of this new mode of preparing patients for surgical operations. It is true, that in its first introduction to the profession, it was attempted to be veiled in mysticism and a patent obtained by a dentist in Boston, to whom the subject was presented by Dr. Jackson, its discoverer, but now all secrecy is removed, and no one entertains a doubt as to the identity of the so-called Letheon, with pure Sulphuric Ether. The only questions now agitating the profession are its best mode of preparation, and secondly, is there any danger in its general administration?

Southern Medical and Surgical Journal

Employment of Sulphuric Ether Vapor in Montreal, Quebec, and Sherbrooke

This agent has been employed in Quebec, this city, and Sherbrooke, but not with uniform success. In Quebec, Dr. James Douglass lately amputated the toes of a man, who had been previously narcotized by the inhalation of the vapor. More lately, in this city, Dr. Nelson removed a tumor from the thigh of a woman under similar circumstances of narcotism. The removal of a leg by Dr. Worthington, of Sherbrooke, was effected under a like state of insensibility from the same cause. In these three instances the successful use of the ether vapor was complete. At the Montreal General Hospital, circumstances lately demanded the amputation of the leg of a patient. Several protracted

attempts were made, and at different intervals, under Dr Campbell to induce the narcotic effects of the ether, but without success, the leg was afterwards removed in the ordinary way. As the man had been of very intemperate habits, it becomes a question how far these habits may have influenced the susceptibility of the patient to the influence of the ether.

British and American Journal of Medical and Physical Science, Montreal