

News, Notes and Queries

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author wishes to thank the Hon. Secretary and the Council of the Hakluyt Society for permission to reproduce the excerpt from Cadamosto.

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New York

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TRAUMATIC PARAPLEGIA TREATED BY OPERATION IN 1841

INJURIES of the spine involving paraplegia and incontinence have, for several millennia, been held to be untreatable. The Edwin Smith papyrus, c. 2800 B.C., stated that 'this was an ailment not to be treated'.¹

Ambroise Paré, in his chapter 'of the Fracture of the Vertebrae or Rackbones of the Back',² described 'numbness and palsie of the armes, legges, fundament and bladder' for which he gave a very poor prognosis, though he added 'you may make an incision, so to take forth the splinters of the broken vertebrae, which driven in, presse the spinal marrow and the nerves thereof'. He did not say that he had attempted this operation himself.

In the eighteenth century, only Henry Cline (1750–1827), of St. Thomas's Hospital, took any active steps to relieve the symptoms of compression. We are told by his pupil, Sir Astley Cooper, that this bold and imaginative surgeon, who provided a link between the teaching of John Hunter and the great surgeons of the early eighteenth century,³ was 'the only person who took a scientific view of this accident. He considered it to be similar to fracture with depression of the cranium, and to require that the pressure be removed'.⁴ Unfortunately, Cline's only case was unsuccessful, and Astley Cooper wrote 'he was blamed for making this trial'.

The patient thus continued to lie beyond the hope of surgery, and Liston, in 1832, mentioned trephining of the spine 'only to condemn it'.⁵

This ineffectual state continued till the 1920's, when there arose a brief interest in laminectomy for this injury. Operative treatment has, however, now been largely superseded, and is only considered under certain circumscribed conditions.^{6, 7} But the

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background has altered. Modern nursing, with its improved techniques of bladder care and bed sore control, and the achievements of the rehabilitation unit, have improved very materially the outlook for the paraplegic patient.

An early example of operative treatment is given in a letter, which has recently come to light, written by Evan Edwards, of Caerphilly, Glamorgan, to George May (1799–1884), senior surgeon of the Royal Berkshire Hospital, Reading.

Caerphilly, Feb^y 4th 1841.

Sir,

I shall not attempt to make any excuse but unfeignedly apologize for my apparent inattention to your letters respecting the spine case.

The subject of the accident was a collier—aged 23. The injury was produced by the falling in of the roof of a coal mine, fracturing the spinous process of the first lumbar vertebra, driving in the arch so as to produce paralysis of the lower extremities the rectum and bladder. I was called in about 11 or 12 weeks after the accident. Having obtained the sanction of the surgeon in attendance I was requested to operate in about a week after my first visit. I made a T or crucial incision and completely exposed the injured bone. I then removed by means of the trephine and Hey's saw* so much of the bone as to admit the point of the elevator into the spinal canal. The displaced bone being elevated the edges of the wound were brought together and healed without much difficulty. The patient soon acquired a measure, and has now perfect control over the function of the bladder and rectum but his power of locomotion is very trifling and sensation imperfect. His general health very good. Regretting my unjustifiable delay in furnishing you with this outline I have only to add that I shall be happy to supply you with more prompt answers to any further enquiries you may wish to make.

I am Sir

Y^{rs} very faithfully

Evan Edwards

to George May Esq^{re}
Surgeon
Reading

Edwards's description of the operation is almost exactly that of Astley Cooper describing Henry Cline's procedure.

A search of the *British and Foreign Medical Review*, edited by John Forbes (later Sir John, 1787–1861) and John Connolly (1794–1866), has revealed in vol. 6, July 1838, p. 162, an uncomplimentary review of the *Institutes of Surgery* by Sir Charles Bell. These were published as two volumes in octavo, Edinburgh, 1838. In connexion with Bell's article on spinal injuries, the anonymous reviewer wrote that elevation of the depressed spine had not been very successful. He quoted four cases: a patient of a surgeon, called Edwards, of Caerphilly, who 'did well', Cline's case, a patient of Frederick Tyrrell (1793–1843) of St. Thomas's Hospital, who died of peritonitis, and, lastly, one reported by the American surgeon, John Rhea Barton (1794–1871), who survived only four days after operation, though with 'momentary return of sensibility'.

The review of Sir Charles Bell's article evidently inspired George May to write to the editor, for, attached to the Edwards letter is a short note from Forbes, dated from Chichester, 3 October 1840. This states that the information about the case had been received from Edwards's brother, a respected practitioner, who lived in Cheapside.

* William Hey (1736–1819), founder and senior surgeon, Leeds Infirmary, described his saw for enlarging orifices in bones in 1803. It is still used.

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A small point of interest is that the copies of the *British and Foreign Medical Review* studied for this note were those also used by George May, 117 years ago, in the Library of the Reading Pathological Society, where the Edwards letter is also preserved.

Few biographical details of Evan Edwards have been discovered, though it might be inferred that he came from the school in which Henry Cline taught. An Evan Edwards appears in the Examination Books of the Royal College of Surgeons as having qualified as Surgeon, 2nd Rate, in February 1797. In 1815 he was surgeon on the *Namur*, and seems to have retired from the Navy in about 1832. The name appears in the *London and Provincial Medical Directory* for 1847, 1848, 1849, but not in 1850. His death may therefore have occurred at about this time, though no obituary notice has been found. Chance preservation of a letter provides us with almost the only memento of one who, like many another forgotten country practitioner, carried to the bedside a resourceful mind and a steady hand.

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K. BRYN THOMAS

XVITH INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE

THE XVIth International Congress of the History of Medicine will be held at the Faculty of Medicine of Montpellier from Monday, 22 September, to Sunday, 28 September, under the general presidency of Monsieur le Doyen Giraud, Dean of the Faculty.

Applications for registration should be addressed to: Professeur Jean Turchini, Président du Comité d'Organisation, Faculté de Médecine, Montpellier (Hérault), France.

The themes for the consideration of the Congress are:

1. The historical connexions between the School of Montpellier and the medical institutions of other countries.
2. The history and expansion of hospitals.
3. Medical iconography in the seventeenth century.
4. The contribution of the New World to therapeutics.
5. Varia.

The entrance fees are:

6,000 French francs—for those who are not members of the International Society of the History of Medicine.