

SOUTHERN
MEDICAL AND SURGICAL
JOURNAL.

Vol. 5.]

NEW SERIES.—DECEMBER, 1849.

[No. 12.]

PART FIRST.

Original Communications.

ARTICLE XXXVIII.

An account of the first use of Sulphuric Ether by Inhalation as an Anæsthetic in Surgical Operations. By C. W. LONG, M. D., of Jefferson, Jackson Co., Georgia.

For nearly three years, the various medical journals have contained numerous articles on the employment of Sulphuric Ether by Inhalation, for the purpose of rendering patients insensible to pain during surgical operations.

The first notice I saw of the use of ether, or rather of Dr. Morton's "Letheon," as an anæsthetic, was in the editorial of the Medical Examiner for December, 1846, in which the editor gives the following extract from a paper by Dr. H. J. Bigelow, contained in the Boston Journal:—"The preparation (letheon) is inhaled from a small two-necked glass globe, and smells of ether, and is, we have little doubt, an ethereal solution of some narcotic substance."

Having on several occasions used ether, since March, 1842, to prevent pain in surgical operations, immediately after reading this notice of "letheon," I commenced a communication to the editor of the Medical Examiner, for publication in that Journal, to notify the medical profession that sulphuric ether, when inhaled, would of itself render surgical operations painless, and that it had then been used by me for that purpose for more than four years. I was interrupted when I had written but a few lines, and was prevented, by a very laborious country

practice, from resuming my communication, until the Medical Examiner for January, 1847, was received, which reached me in a few days after reading the December number. It contained several articles, giving accounts of different experiments in etherization, in which surgical operations were performed without pain. On reading these articles, I determined to wait a few months, before publishing an account of my discovery, and see whether any surgeon would present a claim to having used ether by inhalation in surgical operations prior to the time it was used by me.

A controversy soon ensued between Messrs. Jackson, Morton and Wells, in regard to who was entitled to the honor of being the discoverer of the anæsthetic powers of ether, and a considerable time elapsed before I was able to ascertain the exact period when their first operations were performed. Ascertaining this fact, through negligence I have now permitted a much longer time to elapse than I designed, or than my professional friends with whom I consulted advised; but as no account has been published, (so far as I have been able to ascertain,) of the inhalation of ether being used to prevent pain in surgical operations as early as March, 1842, my friends think I would be doing myself injustice, not to notify my brethren of the medical profession of my priority of the use of ether by inhalation in surgical practice.

I know that my interests have suffered from not making an earlier publication, and I would not be persuaded at this late stage of the ether controversy to present my claim to being the first to use ether as an anæsthetic in surgical operations, if I were not fully satisfied of my ability to establish its justness.

In the month of December, 1841, or January, 1842, the subject of the inhalation of nitrous oxide gas was introduced in a company of young men assembled at night in this village, (Jefferson,) and several persons present desired me to prepare some for their use. I informed them that I had no apparatus for preparing or preserving the gas, but that I had a medicine (sulphuric ether) which would produce equally exhilarating effects; that I had inhaled it myself, and considered it as safe as the nitrous oxide gas. One of the company stated, that he had inhaled ether while at school, and was then willing to inhale

it. The company were all anxious to witness its effects. The ether was introduced: I gave it first to the gentleman who had previously inhaled it, then inhaled it myself, and afterwards gave it to all persons present. They were so much pleased with the exhilarating effects of ether, that they afterwards inhaled it frequently, and induced others to do so, and its inhalation soon became quite fashionable in this county, and in fact extended from this place through several counties in this part of Georgia.

On numerous occasions I have inhaled ether for its exhilarating properties, and would frequently, at some short time subsequent to its inhalation, discover bruised or painful spots on my person, which I had no recollection of causing, and which I felt satisfied were received while under the influence of ether. I noticed, my friends, while etherized, received falls and blows, which I believed were sufficient to produce pain on a person not in a state of anæsthesia, and on questioning them, they uniformly assured me that they did not feel the least pain from these accidents. These facts are mentioned, that the reasons may be apparent why I was induced to make an experiment in etherization.

The first patient to whom I administered ether in a surgical operation, was Mr. James M. Venable, who then resided within two miles of Jefferson, and at present lives in Cobb county, Ga. Mr. Venable consulted me on several occasions in regard to the propriety of removing two small tumours situated on the back part of his neck, but would postpone from time to time having the operations performed, from dread of pain. At length I mentioned to him the fact of my receiving bruises while under the influence of the vapour of ether, without suffering, and as I knew him to be fond of, and accustomed to inhale ether, I suggested to him the probability that the operations might be performed without pain, and proposed operating on him while under its influence. He consented to have one tumour removed, and the operation was performed the same evening. The ether was given to Mr. Venable on a towel; and when fully under its influence I extirpated the tumour. It was encysted, and about half an inch in diameter. The patient continued to inhale ether during the time of the operation; and

when informed it was over, seemed incredulous, until the tumour was shown him. He gave no evidence of suffering during the operation, and assured me, after it was over, that he did not experience the slightest degree of pain from its performance. *This operation was performed on the 30th March, 1842.*

The second operation I performed upon a patient etherized was on the 6th June, 1842, and was on the same person, for the removal of another small tumour. This operation required more time than the first, from the cyst of the tumour having formed adhesions to the surrounding parts. The patient was insensible to pain during the operation, until the last attachment of the cyst was separated, when he exhibited signs of slight suffering, but asserted, after the operation was over, that the sensation of pain was so slight as scarcely to be perceived. In this operation, the inhalation of ether ceased before the first incision was made: since that time I have invariably desired patients, when practicable, to continue its inhalation during the time of the operation.

Having so long neglected presenting my claim to the discovery of the anæsthetic powers of ether; for the purpose of satisfying the minds of all, of its justness, I have procured, I conceive, a sufficient number of certificates to establish the claim indisputably. I present, first, the certificate of James M. Venable, the patient on whom the first experiments in etherization were made, and no comments on it, I conceive, are necessary.

[NOTE.—A few months ago, Dr. Long informed us of his early attempts at etherization, in Surgery. He was then informed that any claim set up at this late day to priority of discovery, would be severely criticised, if not violently resisted; and that he had best, therefore, do all he could to fortify his position. He has accordingly sent us a number of certificates, properly attested; but as it is unusual for medical journals to admit these, and as besides, in our profession, the word of a gentleman is sufficient on all points of controversy, these are of course omitted here. We state, however, they may be seen by any one curious in the matter, and their character may be judged of by the two following, bearing most pointedly on the subject under discussion.

We have only to add, that the writer of this communication is a highly worthy member of the medical profession, exceedingly modest in his pretensions and entitled to full credit for all he advances.]—EDT.

(CERTIFICATES.)

I, James M. Venable, of the county of Cobb, and State of Georgia, on oath, depose and say, that in the year 1842, I resided at my mother's, in Jackson county, about two miles from the village of Jefferson, and attended the village academy that year. In the early part of the year the young men of Jefferson, and the country adjoining, were in the habit of inhaling ether, for its exhilarating powers, and I inhaled it myself frequently for that purpose, and was very fond of its use.

While attending the academy, I was frequently in the office of Dr. C. W. Long, and having two tumours on the side and rather back of my neck, I several times spoke to him about the propriety of cutting them out, but postponed the operation from time to time. On one occasion, we had some conversation about the probability that the tumours might be cut out while I was under the influence of S. ether, without my experiencing pain, and he proposed operating on me while under its influence. I agreed to have one tumour cut out, and had the operation performed that evening after school was dismissed. This was in the early part of the spring of 1842.

I commenced inhaling the ether before the operation was commenced, and continued it until the operation was over. I did not feel the slightest pain from the operation, and could not believe the tumour was removed until it was shown to me.

A month or two after this time, Dr. C. W. Long cut out the other tumour, situated on the same side of my neck. In this operation I did not feel the least pain until the last cut was made, when I felt a little pain. In this operation, I stopped inhaling the ether before the operation was finished.

I inhaled the ether, in both cases, from a towel, which was the common method of taking it.

JAMES M. VENABLE.

GEORGIA, Cobb county, }
July 23d, 1849. }

Sworn to before me.

ALFRED MANES, J. P.

I certify that I was a pupil in the Academy in Jefferson, Jackson county, Ga., in the year 1842. Some time during the spring of that year I was present, and witnessed Dr. C. W. Long cut out a small tumour from the neck of James M. Venable. I am well acquainted with the smell of sulphuric ether, and know that Mr. Venable inhaled it, before and during the time of the operation. He made no sign of suffering pain during the operation; and after the tumour was cut out, he asserted that he did not feel any pain from the cutting out of the tumour.

A few months after this operation, Mr. Venable informed me that Dr. Long had cut out another tumour from his neck, while he was under the effects of ether, and that he did not feel any pain from the operation. Mr. Venable was a pupil in the Academy during the year 1842, and I was intimate with and heard him speak of the operations frequently, and he always asserted they were performed without pain. I know the operations were performed in the year 1842: my brother, Wm. H. Thurmond, had charge of the academy that year, and it was the only time I was a pupil in the academy.

August 21st, 1849.

ANDREW J. THURMOND.

In addition to Mr. Venable's, I present the certificates of E. S. Rawls and Wm. H. Thurmond, who were present, and witnessed one or both operations.

* * * * *

My third experiment in etherization was made on the 3rd July, 1842, and was on a negro boy, the property of Mrs. S. Hemphill, who resides nine miles from Jefferson. The boy had a disease of a toe, which rendered its amputation necessary, and the operation was performed without the boy evincing the least sign of pain.

I present Mrs. Hemphill's statement of the report the boy gave her of the operation on his return home, which I conceive is sufficient on this point.

* * * * *

These were all the surgical operations performed by me during the year 1842, upon patients etherized; no other case occurring in which I believed the inhalation of ether applicable. Since '42, I have performed one or more surgical operations annually, on patients in a state of etherization.

The question will no doubt occur, why did I not publish the results of my experiments in etherization soon after they were made? I was anxious, before making my publication, to try etherization in a sufficient number of cases to fully satisfy my mind that anæsthesia was produced by the ether, and was not the effect of the imagination, or owing to any peculiar insusceptibility to pain in the persons experimented on.

At the time I was experimenting with ether, there were physicians "high in authority," and of justly distinguished character, who were the advocates of mesmerism, and recommended

the induction of the *mesmeric state* as adequate to prevent pain in surgical operations. Notwithstanding thus sanctioned, I was an unbeliever in the science, and of the opinion, that if the mesmeric state could be produced at all, it was only on "those of strong imagination and weak minds," and was to be ascribed solely to the workings of the patient's imaginations. Entertaining this opinion, I was the more particular in my experiments in etherization.

Surgical operations are not of frequent occurrence in a country practice, and especially in the practice of a young physician; yet I was fortunate enough to meet with two cases in which I could satisfactorily test the anæsthetic power of ether. From one of these patients I removed three tumours the same day: the inhalation of ether was used only in the second operation, and was effectual in preventing pain, while the patient suffered severely from the extirpation of the other tumours. In the other case, I amputated two fingers of a negro boy: the boy was etherized during one amputation, and not during the other; he suffered from one operation, and was insensible during the other.

I have procured the certificates of the lady from whom the tumours were removed and of her husband, who was present and witnessed the operations; and also that of the owner of the boy, establishing the fact of the insensibility of the patients to pain during these operations. These certificates were procured in preference to those establishing other operations, because they not only show that the experiments were continued from year to year, but also show that they were conducted so as to test the power of etherization.

* * * * *

After fully satisfying myself of the power of ether to produce anæsthesia, I was desirous of administering it in a severer surgical operation than any I had performed. In my practice, prior to the published account of the use of ether as an anæsthetic, I had no opportunity of experimenting with it in a capital operation, my cases being confined, with one exception, to the extirpation of small tumours, and the amputation of fingers and toes.

I have stated that ether was frequently inhaled in this and

some of the adjoining counties, for its exhilarating effects; and although I am conscious that I do not deserve any credit for introducing its use for that purpose, yet as others, through their friends, have claimed to be the first to shew its safety, most of the certificates I have obtained establish the fact of its frequent inhalation for its exhilarating effects. I met with R. H. Goodman, who was present the night ether was first inhaled in Jefferson, and who removed to Athens, and introduced its inhalation in that place, and present his certificate. All the young gentlemen who were present the night I first administered ether, with one exception, are living, and their certificates can be procured, if necessary.*

* * * * *

I have now, in a very concise manner, presented a "plain, unvarnished" account of some of my experiments in etherization, and have said nothing of the comparative merits of ether, and the other anæsthetics, because that was foreign to my present subject. Had I been engaged in the practice of my profession in a city, where surgical operations are performed daily, the discovery would, no doubt, have been confided to others, who would have assisted in the experiments; but occupying a different position, I acted differently, whether justifiable or not. The result of my second experiment in etherization, was such as led me to believe that the anæsthetic state was of such short duration that ether would only be applicable in cases in which its effects could be kept up, by constant inhalation, during the time of the performance of the operations. Under this impression, up to January, 1847, I had not used ether, in but one case, in extracting teeth, and thus deprived myself of experimenting in the only class of cases which are of frequent occurrence in a country practice.

While cautiously experimenting with ether, as cases occurred, with the view of fully testing its anæsthetic powers, and its applicability to severe, as well as minor, surgical operations, others, more favorably situated, engaged in similar experiments; and consequently the publication of etherization did not "bide my time." This being the case, I leave it with an enlightened

* Our friend, Dr. Long, can lay no claim to the introduction of sulphuric ether as an exhilarating agent when its vapour is inhaled.—Edr.

medical profession, to say, whether or not my claim to the discovery of etherization is forfeited, by not being presented earlier, and with the decision which may be made, I shall be content.

ARTICLE XXXIX.

Three Cases of the successful administration of Chloroform, occurring in the practice of Drs. ERSKINE & SHEFFEY, of Huntsville, Alabama.

CASE 1st. A little daughter of Mr. M——, aged about 4 years, some months previous to the operation, had a needle thrust into her breast, over the sternum, the point breaking off in the bone. Caries ensued around the point of the needle, producing a great deal of pain, and great suffering when touched. Chloroform was administered; a crucial incision, two inches long, was made through the centre of the inflamed point. No sensibility was manifested during the dissection of the flaps, and removal of the decayed bone. She was kept profoundly under its influence from 30 to 40 minutes, no unpleasant symptoms following.

This operation, without the anæsthetic agent, must have proved excruciatingly painful.

CASE 2nd. A negro boy, belonging to Capt. M——, aged about 14 or 15, had his frontal bone fractured above the orbital arch, a portion of bone driven into the brain through the dura mater, &c., and forcing out a portion of its substance. When seen, he was sensible, and resisted all efforts to examine the wound, to elevate or remove the bone. Chloroform was administered; profound sleep came on; the operation performed; several spiculæ were removed; sutures applied to the flaps, and the wound was dressed, while the boy remained perfectly quiet. He was kept under the influence of chloroform nearly an hour; no unfavorable symptoms supervened. The patient recovered without an unpleasant occurrence.

CASE 3rd. A negro girl, aged about 13 years, belonging to Mr. R——. She had extensive necrosis of the os femoris, and was much emaciated from long suffering. Chloroform was ad-