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ON POISONING BY OPIUM.

Read before the Toronto Medico-Chirurgical Society,
2d December, 1846.

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MR. CHAIRMAN: As no intention of presenting a paper this evening has been expressed by any of the members now present, I propose, with your permission, to submit for the consideration of the society an instance of poisoning, which has recently fallen under my observation. I am quite aware that cases of this nature not unfrequently occur, but this circumstance, I hope, will not be deemed of sufficient weight to shut out from the open field of inquiry a further investigation into the character of their phenomena, and the method of treatment which experience may point out as being the most desirable to pursue. It would, I am sure, but prove the expression of your own sentiments, were I to affirm, that, in ranging through that field, some new feature is continually presenting itself; some peculiarity, which had hitherto escaped the closest observation; some modification, which the slightest change of relative position (like that of the revolving kaleidoscope), can not fail to produce in the ever varying phases of medical science. Of this a pleasing evidence was afforded on the occasion of our last regular meeting, when some interesting remarks were read, tending to show, that even to the concentrated wisdom displayed in the production of our pharmacopeia, additions of a highly useful character may unquestionably be made; and although the same result is not now to be anticipated, and it is out of my power to lead my professional brethren this evening through any other than the ordinary track, yet the mere discussion of a subject of this nature, must carry with it a greater or less degree of interest, and must have a tendency to elicit something which may prove of service in the future treatment of similar cases.

Two instances of poisoning by opium have occurred in my practice, within the last few months. The first had its origin in pecuniary losses, and presented no features of an interesting nature, except that on recovery extreme vigilance was present, and a long period elapsed before sleep could be procured. The second took place within the last few days, the attempt at

suicide being induced by the previous commission of a crime, the painful details of which it would be unnecessary to lay before you.

The patient was a young man, eight and twenty or thirty years of age, naturally very intelligent, but inclined to habits of dissipation, and occasionally indulging in the free use of ardent spirits. His guilt having been discovered and exposed, he resolved upon self-destruction, and for this purpose he procured from a druggist one ounce, by measurement, of tincture of opium. On retiring to his bed room, at a late hour, he swallowed the contents of the phial, but shortly afterwards, being seized with remorse, he gave an alarm, by knocking repeatedly against the partition wall. Pointing, with some excitement of manner, to the hearth on which the phial had been thrown, he observed, "I have done the deed." It was soon discovered that he had poisoned himself, but from ill-judged and unfounded apprehension, a messenger was despatched in the first instance to the police station, a considerable distance from the spot. Two of the constables on duty promptly arrived, and a second message was then sent, requesting my attendance. I reached the house shortly after midnight, and, as near as could be ascertained, about three quarters of an hour after the opium had been taken. The phial had been broken by the fall, and it was evident that a small quantity (probably half a drachm) of the fluid had remained, as traces of it could be distinctly seen on the hearth. He was now in a state of profound coma, or stupor; the pulse quick and small; the respiration somewhat slower than usual, but scarcely to be deemed stertorous; the eye-lids closed, and the pupils rigidly and permanently contracted. The face was palid; lips somewhat of a blueish tinge; and the skin generally perspirable. The odour from the drug was less perceptible than might have been expected. The stomach must have been empty, or nearly so, at the time the poison was swallowed, and consequently rapid effect took place. With reference to this point, Dr. David Skae observes,* that in a case of poisoning by opium, which occurred in Edinburgh Castle, the particulars of which were furnished him by Dr. Cowper, of the 29th regiment; "the

* Cormack's Journal.