

The Medico-Legal Aspect of Chloroform Administration.

The employment of such a powerful, and under certain circumstances lethal, agent as chloroform places a very great responsibility upon the shoulders of the medical man who undertakes the task of inducing anesthesia. So great is this responsibility that the necessity of entrusting the induction of anesthesia to a qualified man specially delegated thereto is generally recognized, and no one will gain-say the inexpediency of cumulating the functions of chloroformist and operator in the same individual. Admitting that in country practice it is not always practicable to secure the assistance of a fellow-practitioner, the onus of establishing that point naturally rests with the operator. A mishap which occurred under these circumstances in the North recently formed the subject of an action for damages, it being alleged by the plaintiff—the widow of the unfortunate victim—that death was due to the inobservance of certain precautions by the surgeon, amounting to negligence. The alleged negligence consisted in the chloroform having been administered soon after a hearty meal, in the absence of skilled assistance, and the lack of appliances and drugs for resuscitation. The jury returned a verdict in favor of the defendant, having, no doubt, been influenced by the consideration that in the event of negligence being established, patients in districts remote from the centres of civilization would in future be deprived of relief even if they were willing to incur the extra risks. Any other decision, indeed, would have had far-reaching and very serious consequences for the public, since no practitioner would henceforth have been willing to render himself liable to an action for damages for doing his best to perform what he conceived to be his duty. Looking at the question from a broader point of view, it may be laid down that a practitioner who does not take all the usual precautions before administering an anesthetic, and who more particularly does not make use of the best available means which the ingenuity of inventors has placed at his disposal to minimize the risks of anesthetization, fails in his duty to his patient. We are impelled to this remark by the fact that practically all the deaths under chloroform occur when the drug is administered by what is commonly and erroneously described as the "open" method, that is to say, on a towel or ordinary mask. Present methods of teaching in the medical schools are largely responsible for this faulty procedure being so popular. It is quite the exception for a practitioner to have been trained to use a scientific inhaler which alone will enable him to measure the exact quantity of the drug that is being inhaled. One of these days the public will awaken to the unnecessary risk to which they are exposed by the neglect to