

## THE OPIUM HABIT AND ITS TREATMENT.

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Read before the Canada Medical Society at Montreal, August 25th, 1884.

Throughout the whole range of our *Materia Medica* there is perhaps no drug whose potency for good and evil is more profound, than that of opium. Administered by skilful hands it has a wide range of usefulness; dabbled in by charlatans its dangers and evils are manifold.

It is not, however, to the use of opium in the hands of the intelligent physician that I would direct your attention, but to its employment as a habit, its daily use as an article of consumption constituting what has been variously called "the opium habit," "opium-eating," "chronic papaverism," or the "opium psycho-neurosis." The extent to which this habit (or more properly speaking, disease,) exists, may in some degree be judged of by noting the large quantities of opium annually imported to America, which in the year 1882 amounted to over 300,000 pounds, an amount greatly in excess of what could possibly be required for medicinal purposes.

This fact should put us on the alert and cause us to ask ourselves, how far are we as medical men responsible for this ever increasing evil?

The manner in which opium is employed by its slaves varies, and is to a certain extent determined by the special circumstances under which the habit was at first contracted. Some smoke it, some snuff it, others eat the gum, drink laudanum, paregoric or other preparation containing it; but by far the most common mode of administration is the use of the hypodermic syringe, the employment of which appears to have increased opium habituates to an alarming extent. A druggist in New York says that he sells on an average one hypodermic syringe a day to this class of people, and that on some days he disposes of five or six.

It would be difficult to describe with accuracy the power exerted by opium over the

human system when habitually used. Any words of mine would fail to adequately express the dreadful sufferings a confirmed opium taker endures, when deprived for any length of time of his usual portion. It would require the pen of a De Quincey or a Coleridge to do the subject ample justice. The drug holds its victims in bonds from which he cannot free himself; he is as powerless in the presence of this monster as is a sapling in the trunk of an elephant. No fetter of steel ever held its prisoner more securely, and few pains to which human flesh is heir are equal to those of the opium-taker. Any attempt to abruptly cut off the supply entails upon the sufferer tortures frightful to behold; and unless the accustomed stimulant which his system demands is speedily supplied suicide or death from exhaustion is apt to close the scene.

Much has been said about the pleasures of opium and the sublimity of dreams brought about by its influence. No doubt some persons do experience pleasurable sensations, but this is only in the early stages of the disease, when opium has not become a daily necessity and when days or even a week can be passed in comparative comfort without having recourse to the drug. Others never experience these pleasures, but *all* sooner or later suffer the pains.

The causes which induce the habit are various. Few persons, of their own free will, wantonly commence taking it; if there are any such, they are open to censure in the highest degree, and in them the habit may at first be looked upon as a vice. Many resort to it to induce sleep and quiet nervous restlessness, not knowing the consequences of their indulgence. But by far the greater proportion of opium-takers have had the drug administered to them for the relief of pain, either mental or physical, in the multi-form conditions under which it arises. Opium does not cure the cause of this pain, it simply mitigates the suffering; therefore the necessity of its continuance until the habit, which is quickly formed, presents itself in all its hideous reality. Such patients are deserving of our sympathy and aid. It is not their fault that they are "opium-eaters;" they have not brought this unhappy condition upon themselves, and it