

CONCERNING THE EARLY DAYS OF OVARIOTOMY.

By JOHN GORHAM, M.R.C.S.

IN the year 1839 a paper of mine was published in the pages of THE LANCET, entitled "On the Propriety of Extirpating the Cyst in some Cases of Ovarian Dropsy." I am anxious to revert to that paper for several reasons, which I shall now as briefly as possible specify. At the time to which I refer (1839) I was a pupil at Guy's Hospital, occupying an advanced post, and not unfrequently taking Dr. Thomas Addison's out-patients when he left for the recess in the autumn. The patients suffering from ovarian dropsy were then, so far as Guy's Hospital was concerned, in a curious, not to say somewhat perilous position: things had come to this crisis, that no medicines, topical or internal, had been found to have any good effect, but rather the reverse, the health of the patients being deteriorated by the large doses of iodine, with not unfrequently mercurial and purgative treatment, while eventually tapping was had recourse to just for the sake of saving the patient's life, or to be repeated should the accumulation in the sac again take place.

This was the state of things in Guy's Hospital in 1839, when the late Dr. Thomas Addison stated to me, before leaving his out-patients in my charge, "Should ovarian dropsy cases present themselves, *do nothing*." I believe that in this hospital nothing was done at that time, saving only a palliative treatment, nor am I aware that at any other hospital in London was there any other treatment more successful. At this juncture I received from Mr. William West, surgeon, Tunbridge, a huge ovarian cyst just filling a large handbox, and capable of containing, when recent, upwards of twenty pints of fluid, which cyst he had removed from a patient of his near Tunbridge. This cyst was placed in the museum of Guy's Hospital, and a paper was written and read by myself at the Physical Society of Guy's Hospital, stating the nature of the operation, and advocating its performance in future cases. The late Mr. Bransby Cooper was present at its reading, and suggested to me to take the paper up on the following Monday to the late Sir Benjamin Brodie, which I did. A few weeks after the reading of this paper the operation for the removal of an ovarian cyst was performed in Guy's Hospital for the first time, and I am not aware that any other operation had been performed in London prior to this. Unfortunately the patient died, complications attending the case. Still the operation was planted in London, and with what success the labours of Mr. Isaac Baker Brown and the more recent achievements of Mr. Spencer Wells will abundantly testify.

While writing my paper for the Physical Society of Guy's Hospital, it was by a curious coincidence that I alighted upon a description of the identical operation which had been performed by Mr. West. This description was contained in an old book which I accidentally turned up on a bookstall in Lambeth New-cut. I copied it then and there, and introduced it in my paper; and from its important bearings, added to the fact that it was written by no one less than Dr. William Hunter, it may not be out of place to transcribe it word for word:—"If it be proposed, indeed, to make such a wound in the belly as will admit only two fingers or so, and then to tap the bag, and draw it out, so as to bring the root or peduncle close to the wound of the belly, that the surgeon may cut it without introducing his hand, surely in a case otherwise so desperate it would be advisable to do it, could we beforehand know that the circumstances would admit of such treatment." Here, then, in all essential features was Mr. West's operation—the short incision, the emptying of the sac, the pulling it through the opening, and then cutting the peduncle. These four procedures have formed the basis of all the operations which have since been performed, the principal addition being the enlargement of the incision to enable the operator to separate the adhesions, if such existed prior to the withdrawal of the sac. Nothing more needs to be advanced, it is conceived, to show that Mr. William West, of Tunbridge, was in 1839 in advance of the London accoucheurs, for even after he had proved the possibility of success of the operation by demonstrating the sac at Guy's Hospital, his patient being then alive and enjoying excellent health,* still the thing was regarded with grave suspicion in the metropolis, and the first case that was treated by his plan died in Guy's Hospital after an operation by Mr. Morgan, thus offering no strong inducement to a repetition of the experiment. Even Sir Benjamin Brodie returned me my paper without note or comment, thinking, it is more than probable, that as he had nothing practically to offer on the innovation, he might as well be silent altogether. Thirty-four years have now elapsed, and ovariectomy is in this year (1874) an orthodox thing, and takes its rank with the other operations in surgery.

There is another aspect of this subject. It is a painful one; but I do not deem it right to withhold it from the members of the profession. Mr. West has been dead now many years. An only daughter survives him, who is in straitened circumstances. This lady resides at Gravesend, has a small ladies' school which scarcely keeps her, and is also an agent for governesses; but her health is bad, and she has great trouble to live. Should any member of the profession choose to lend her a helping hand, he may do so by sending direct to her address—13, Darnley-street, Gravesend. I believe that some members of the profession are

* This patient lived many years after the operation.

receiving as much as one hundred guineas for a single operation for ovariectomy. May it not be fair to ask these gentlemen to contribute a trifle to the daughter of one who stood foremost in introducing this operation to the metropolis of London, and so to the whole world?

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