



## Newsletter, April 2001

### Word of Mouth - 1

Fictional characters, like real people, sometimes suffer from toothache. Writers from Chekhov to Ian Rankine have put their heroes in the dentist's chair, and even the toughest of them have invariably failed this test of character. We thought it might be instructive as well as entertaining to look at some of these accounts and consider what they reveal about attitudes to dentistry – and dentists – at particular times and places; and also, as in our first example, to look for recurring themes down the decades. (We might even look at the décor of dental surgeries, which was a minor obsession of Graham Greene's and is perhaps a matter of some therapeutic significance.).

A dental opinion will be given after each literary extract, and in addition subscribers are invited to send their own very brief comments for publication in the next issue. Contributions to this series would be welcomed, with or without an expert opinion attached. Examples from Scottish fiction would be particularly appreciated, but we begin with a transatlantic classic. The following piece of DIY dentistry is described in Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*, published in 1876. It would have been of interest here to know Tom's exact age, but the author was deliberately unspecific so that his hero would represent universal boyhood. Mark Twain, incidentally, also wrote graphic accounts of his own dental experiences.

*"Oh auntie, my sore toe's mortified!"*

*The old lady sank down into a chair and laughed a little, then cried a little, then did both together. This restored her and she said:*

*"Tom, what a turn you did give me. Now you shut up this nonsense and climb out of this."*

*The groans ceased and the pain vanished from the toe. The boy felt a little foolish, and he said:*

*"Aunt Polly it seemed mortified, and it hurt so I never minded my tooth at all."*

*"Your tooth, indeed! What's the matter with your tooth?"*

*"One of them's loose, and it aches perfectly awful."*

*"There, there, now, don't begin that groaning again. Open your mouth. Well – your tooth is loose, but you're not going to die about that. Mary get me a silk thread, and a chunk of fire out of the kitchen."*

*Tom said:*

*"O, please auntie, don't pull it out. It don't hurt any more. I wish I may never stir if it does. Please don't, auntie. I don't want to stay home from school. "*

*"Oh, you don't, don't you? So all this row was because you thought you'd get to stay home from school and go a fishing? Tom, Tom, I love you so, and you seem to try every way you can to break my old heart with your outrageousness." By this time the dental instruments were ready. The old lady made one end of the*

*silk thread fast to Tom's tooth with a loop and tied the other to the bed-post. Then she seized the chunk of fire and suddenly thrust it almost into the boy's face. The tooth hung dangling by the bed-post now. But all trials bring their compensations. As Tom wended to school after breakfast, he was the envy of every boy he met because the gap in his upper row of teeth enabled him to expectorate in a new and admirable way. He gathered quite a following of lads interested in the exhibition . . . .*

### **Comment: Distractions from extractions**

Transference of symptoms is not restricted to small boys, although referred pain from tooth to toe is perhaps a little anatomically imaginative. Tom's experience of pain from a deciduous tooth in the process of shedding is unusual, or is it just that sufferers, quite reasonably, don't usually trouble dentists with it? The principle of distraction is one used by us all from time to time. My favourite was the technique of penicillin injection once described to me as in constant use in a busy London clinic, which was to slap a patient on one buttock while simultaneously inserting the needle into the other! Perhaps likely to attract the attentions of the GMC/GDC in these times. The use of a hot coal lunged in the patient's face would probably have similar consequences. Do we need to advise our readers "not to try this one at home"?

I can, however, attest from personal experience to the efficacy of the piece-of-thread method of exodontia, which was used successfully on at least one occasion in the now-distant past – and I suppose the sixpence reward for stoicism was my first dental fee. I was, of course, too well brought up to expectorate, which, in any case, we knew from the authority of the notices in the buses, was sure to spread tuberculosis.

**D.A.McG.**

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### **Books received**

There has been a good response to the appeal for books of historical interest.

Mrs M. Petrina Sweeney has presented the group with a copy of Sir John Tomes's "System of Dental Surgery", published in 1887. An inscription on the flyleaf indicates that it was presented to Mr Alexander Naismith in 1888 on his resignation as secretary of the Tradeston Evangelical Union's Young Men's Sabbath Morning Class in order to go to America to further his studies as a dental student. He was the ninth student to be registered at Glasgow Dental Hospital and School on 20th June 1883 and qualified LDS, FPSGlasg in 1890. Later in his career he was in practice in Abbotsford Place and then in Knowe Terrace, Pollokshields. He was an enthusiastic golfer who is remembered as the donor of the Naismith Cup, which is still up for competition each year by members of the Western Dental Golf Club.

Dr Andrew Kippen has donated a copy of "The Woodside Story", reprinted from *Health Bulletin* Vol XXXI, No. 3, May 1973. This booklet, with an introduction by Sir John Brotherston, Chief Medical Officer, Scottish Home and Health Department, is a compilation of articles reviewing the planning, construction and early days of a purpose-built health centre to provide general medical and other health services, including dental surgeries, in the Woodside area of Glasgow.

Dr Kippen has also donated "The School Health Service" by J. T. W. Ewan, Principal Medical Officer, School Health Service, Glasgow. It follows the development of the service in Glasgow from the initiation of medical inspection of schoolchildren in 1910 to 1955 when treatment had come within the province of the National Health Service. The continuous records of the state of schoolchildren's health and the condition of their teeth shows how much improvement was achieved over this period. The volume, which is undated, was produced by Glasgow Corporation's health and welfare department.

In addition, textbooks belonging to A. Pacitti have been received from Jack Murphy, BDS, Bishopbriggs.

Other books would be greatly appreciated, as would practice accounts, old, photographs, records or other documents relating to the history of Scotland in general and the West of Scotland in particular. Contact Dr H. Noble or Dr R.M. Ross at the Dental Hospital.

Contributions to this newsletter, again relating to Scotland in general and the West of Scotland in particular, would also be warmly welcomed.

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