



Glimpses of life in a Victorian surgery

*A penny notebook containing a puzzling letter offers some insights into nineteenth-century dentistry in London. The American dental historian **Malvin E. Ring**,* who has contributed to earlier issues of this newsletter, draws on his own family connections in this account. The notebook belongs to the niece of his wife's brother-in-law, who lives in Texas. Her great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather – who had a Scottish surname – were dentists practising in London. Dr Ring places the story within the context of moves to regulate the dental profession.*

Dental practice in the first seven decades of the nineteenth century was totally unregulated. After increasing pressure for reform the 1878 Dentists Act and subsequent Dentists Register introduced legal and professional controls to prevent malpractice and incompetence. Henceforth only qualified and registered practitioners could hold the title of "dentist" or "dental surgeon" – but the new law allowed people to register if they were "in bona fide practice of dentistry prior to 22 July 1878," either separately (i.e. with no other trade or profession) or in connection with medicine, surgery or pharmacy.

The late dental historian J. Menzies Campbell painted a vivid picture of the immediate effect of the Dentists Act: "There was an unprecedented rush by all and sundry (many bogus) to have their names enrolled within the prescribed period. For instance, in January, 1878, there were approximately 2200 dentists practising in Great Britain; on 1 August 1879 there were 5289 registered dentists!"¹



This 1870 Punch cartoon shows the interior of a pharmacist's shop. The door in the background is marked "Consulting Room" and below it "Dentist." The customer is saying to the pharmacist, "Gie us a Christmas-box, Guvnor. I allus has my teeth drawn here." To which the pharmacist answers, "All right, my man. Step inside and I'll take one out for nothing."

Hasler Harris, born in England about 1840, was among the practitioners in that stampede. His father, Richard Harris, practised dentistry in his home in Oakley Square in London. It is not known where the younger Harris got his training, but it is most probable that he was taught by his father. There is evidence that Harris had a brother who also practised dentistry. Hasler Harris married and fathered 12 children, of whom nine lived to adulthood. One of his daughters – who lived into her 90s – characterised her father as "eccentric in the English sense" and also as "very creative", and as one who "catered to the carriage trade". He died in 1911 at the age of 71. The elder Harris had either died by the time the Dentists Registrar went into force or else had retired from

practice. His son, Hasler, however, had been practising for about 10 years, albeit without proper qualification, i.e., an LDS. He is listed however in the very first Dentists Register as residing and practising at 34 Bedford Square, London WC. The Register states that he was registered by virtue of being in the practice of dentistry at the relevant date, and that he did not have any other occupation – such as the practice of medicine – associated with his name.

Bedford Square was one of the better residential neighbourhoods in London, and the fact that Harris had his abode there testifies to his success as a dentist. The square, in Bloomsbury, was built in the early days of the nineteenth century in answer to London's burgeoning population; the demand for fine housing was outrunning the supply. In the short period between 1801 and 1841 London's population doubled, from under a million to nearly two million!²

Hasler Harris kept a small penny notebook in which he wrote many notes, including sketches of plans of his garden, which he was enlarging, as well as pictures of beehives he was planning to construct. Tucked away among these notes is an intriguing draft of a letter concerning one of his female patients. It is difficult, at this distance, and without further clues, to determine to whom the letter is being sent and for what purpose. On the surface it appears that Dr Harris is reporting to another dentist about a patient who had been referred to him for treatment. Or possibly he had been consulted by the second dentist about what to do for the patient. At any rate, the letter gives us an interesting look at relations between the medical and dental professions and a knowledge of anaesthetics used as well as the limitations associated with their use. The letter follows:



I think it well to send you an account of the Surries case – my brother saw her here and his reports are of a very bad state of things. He says there is scarcely a sound tooth in her head. I wonder if not all the double ones are rotten and diseased to the gums . . . It might be quite hopeless to try to do anything for her relief short of the removal of at least some of these.

She would like them to be restorable, if that were determined, and that it should be done under the influence of Nit. Ox. Gas. [It] would necessitate several visits – as probably not more than one tooth (in such a state) could be got at, at a time – the effect of the gas not lasting more than about a quarter of a minute (25 seconds!).

Hasler Harris *The medicals who administer these anaesthetics for us are willing to take half fees (the usual one being Guelmill). But in such a case as this, the fee would soon run up to a serious amount, although one could not make any charge for performing the operation.*

Of interest is the fact that at the time this letter was written, nitrous oxide gas was administered alone, without concomitant oxygen. That is why the patient was allowed to remain anaesthetised for less than half a minute. Also, in accordance with the custom, both in England and the United States, dentists did not charge the patient a fee for extraction of teeth when dentures were to be constructed. But this presented the problem of who should absorb the charges of the physician-anaesthetist. More intriguing is the import of the statement that the patient desired the restoration of the teeth to be done under anaesthesia. This would have been highly unusual, given the fact that a patient could not be kept under pure nitrous oxide for time enough to complete a restoration. But if restoration were being

contemplated why does Dr Harris speak of not charging for the operation? All of this notwithstanding, the letter has allowed us to peek into the practice of a busy, cosmopolitan dentist in Victorian London.

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References

1. Campbell, J. Menzies, *Dentistry Then and Now* (privately printed, Glasgow, 1981), p.255.

2. Hayes, John, *London, A Pictorial History* (Batsford, 1969), p. 24.

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