

EMPLOYMENT OF
CHLOROFORM IN A DIFFICULT LABOUR.

MALPRACTICE OF A MIDWIFE.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—As the following case was the first in which I used the chloroform, and as it exemplifies the meddlesome and injurious treatment of female accoucheurs, I send it to you.

I have the honour to remain, yours truly,

Hackney-road, Jan. 1848.

E. MOORE, M.D., M.R.C.S.E.

On a Sunday evening in 1847, I received an urgent message, requesting me to visit immediately a lady residing at Dalston, who, I was told, had been in labour (under the care of a midwife) for many hours; but as no satisfactory progress seemed to be making, the friends wished the attendance of a medical man, to ascertain if it were progressing safely.

On arriving, I was ushered into the bedroom, and found the patient,—a tall, powerful woman, very robust, and about forty years of age,—forcibly held on the bed by several persons; and I was informed that her violence had been such, that two medical gentlemen who had seen her had been so furiously assaulted, that they had left, and declined to have anything to do with the case.

The midwife, in a supercilious, half-drunken, ignorant manner, was loud in her protest against the intrusion of a medical man, asserting that she knew her business, and did not want any interference; for if the people would hold the patient, she could and would deliver her without any doctor, and much better than any of them.

I ascertained that the patient was in labour with the fourth child, and had previously had favourable times; but, owing to reverses, she had, for the sake of economy, employed this time a female to attend her in her accouchement; and it was insinuated, had latterly, from lowness of spirits, taken to rather an excess of stimulants.

The midwife had been fetched on Saturday, at four P.M., as the patient had labour-pains of tolerable strength, and at short intervals. This midwife, upon examination, ruptured the membranes, and ordered a strong glass of brandy-and-water to be made hot, into which she placed a quantity of brown powder, (ergot?) and this she repeated several times in the course of the night, at the same time taking herself some brandy. The pains, from being intermittent, became violent and continuous, but seemingly without satisfactory progress, until about six A.M.; when the midwife assured all around, that although the patient was becoming delirious, there was no danger, and that she should administer something that would give the patient some sleep for a few hours, when she would herself return, and get over the case safely. She then gave some drops, (tincture of opium,) and left; but the patient getting more delirious, the midwife being again fetched, administered more laudanum at various intervals, and the patient got more and more violent, until the persons surrounding, being alarmed, sent for the other medical men, with the result before mentioned.

Finding the patient furiously delirious on the accession of the pains, which were almost continuous, but feeble; and finding, after considerable resistance, the pulse beating like a sledge-hammer, at 100, the conjunctivæ gorged, pupils dilated, and face flushed and of a dull crimson hue; I determined to abstract blood (a proceeding loudly denounced by the midwife) to thirty ounces. I then applied evaporating lotion to the head, and after some time it produced a state of partial tranquillity.

As the midwife either could not or would not state the presentation, I proceeded, during one of the temporary lulls, to an examination per vaginam, the patient screaming out, the moment I touched her, from excessive tenderness. I found the external and internal labia enormously swollen, hot and dry, not the slightest secretion, (a hand protruding between,) the bladder distended, and the rectum loaded with *faeces*.

After considerable difficulty, from the excited state of the patient, I drew off two pints of high-coloured turbid urine, and expressed an intention of stepping home to get my enema apparatus, (my assistant being from home, so that it was no use sending for it;) but I met with the information, that there was no egress for me, the door being locked, as they feared I should perhaps leave them in the lurch, as the other gentlemen had done. Finding argument and remonstrance useless, and feeling too much for the patient's state to be angry, I submitted to imprisonment while I sent some distance to a friend for his apparatus, upon the arrival of which I administered, at short intervals, three enemata, and unloaded the bowel of an enormous quantity of *faeces* and *flatus*.

The patient was still very violent in resistance; but the face was less flushed, and the pulse at 85, and full; and upon again examining per vaginam, there was no diminution of the swelling, and no tendency to secretion. I therefore injected some warm water into the vagina and uterus, and administered forty drops of chloroform (Ferguson's) upon a piece of sponge, fixed, by means of pins, in a cone, made of the stiff cover of a copy-book. In less than one minute the patient became perfectly tractable. I then got her into a convenient position, and ascertained that the child's arm within the vagina was enormously swollen, and that the passage was still dry and hot. I kept the patient under the influence of the chloroform by putting twenty drops upon the sponge from time to time; and at the end of forty minutes I was pleased to find sufficient relaxation of the parts to enable me to introduce my hand and turn, having previously injected some warm water; and the patient was delivered safely of a fine male child, which is alive, and likely to live. The arm was nearly black when born, but seems likely to recover its normal state by the means adopted—viz., warm applications and envelopes of oiled silk. The placenta followed shortly after with very little difficulty.

There can, I think, be scarcely a doubt that the midwife's conduct deserves the severest reprehension, and ought to be punishable, although death did not result from her self-sufficient and dangerous meddling. She acts upon the strength of a diploma granted by a Professor Dewhurst, which she exhibits with great importance, asserting that most of the medical men in this vicinity have learnt the obstetric art from her!