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OBSTETRICS AT THE NEW YORK ALMSHOUSE AND AT BELLEVUE HOSPITAL*

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I^N colonial times the care of mother and child was entirely in the hands of midwives. The midwives of New Amsterdam were no better and no worse than their professional sisters in Holland who aroused the ire of Hendrick Van Deventer. The father of modern midwifery wrote: "they do not understand their business;" and again he lamented "I cannot sufficiently wonder at the gross ignorance of most midwives." He urged that examination of the bodies of women dying in childbirth be made a matter of law, to find out whether the mother and fetus died naturally or "sadly perished by the carelessness and cruel hand of the midwife."

The midwives of New Amsterdam have been classed by some writers among the Zeikenstroosters or comforters of the sick. The Zeikenstroosters, however, were men and their function was purely spiritual although they occasionally looked after the sick in defiance of an ecclesiastical ruling prohibiting them from practicing medicine.

Improvement in American obstetrics did not take place until just prior to the Revolution when young colonial physicians began to go abroad for study. The eighteenth century was a period of remarkable growth in the specialty. Knowledge of the obstetrical forceps enabled physicians to displace the Sairey Gamps who had reigned so long in the lying-in chamber. The most potent factor in the manifold advances of the period was the rise of the new humanitarian spirit. As part of this the infant welfare movement emerged. "In the nurture and management of infants as well as in the treatment of lying-in women," wrote Lettsom in his *Medical Memoirs* in 1774, "the reformation hath equalled that in the smallpox; by these two circumstances alone incredible numbers have been rescued from the grave."

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Among those studying abroad were William Shippen, Jr., of Philadelphia, James Lloyd of Boston and Samuel Bard of New York. They returned from Edinburgh and London filled with inspiration by their contact with great clinical obstetricians like William Smellie and William Hunter. Each one became the pioneer teacher of obstetrics in his community. Dr. Samuel Bard emulating Dr. John Morgan of Philadelphia, organized the medical school at Kings College (later Columbia) in 1769. At the first Commencement he urged in a notable discourse the usefulness and necessity of a public hospital. This address led to the founding of the New York Hospital, which was chartered in 1771 but did not open for the reception of patients until January 3rd, 1791. Delay during the reconstruction period in the re-establishment of the Medical School and the opening of the hospital was undoubtedly due to divided loyalties engendered in the medical profession by the struggle for Independence.

In 1736, a new Almshouse was built on the Commons where the City Hall now stands. Here according to Dr. Robert Carlisle was the primitive trace of Bellevue Hospital. Following the war the Almshouse was utilized for the first clinical teaching in New York. Both Valentine Seaman and David Hosack studied at the city Almshouse which according to Dr. J. W. Francis was "at that time the only institution in New York in which medical instruction was imparted." Dr. Nicholas Romaine, Dr. Benjamin Kissam and Dr. William Moore were visiting physicians and Dr. Wright Post, the visiting surgeon.

We read that Dr. William Moore's attention "was always more specially directed to the practice of Midwifery, in which he acquired a very extensive experience and practiced with great success, keeping a record of all cases which he attended for the year 1781 to 1823, which amounted to nearly 3,000 cases."

A new Almshouse was built on Chambers Street in 1796. Here the first lying-in hospital in New York City was established in 1799. The previous year a severe epidemic of yellow fever had swept the city. Many expectant mothers lost their husbands. Their pitiful condition aroused the sympathy of Dr. David Hosack. Through his efforts the New York Lying-In Hospital was incorporated in February, 1799. A place was secured at No. 2 Cedar Street and an appeal for subscriptions was made in the Commercial Advertiser for July 23, 1799. In the Medical Repository for 1800, under "New York Lying-In" is the note:

"We are informed that this Hospital will be ready for the reception of patients on the first of August."

Prior to the opening of the institution on Cedar Street a lying-in ward was opened in the Almshouse Hospital on Chambers Street. The Medical Repository for May, 1799 states that:

"A lying-in ward has been established in the Almshouse of the city of New York. The cases which occur there are numerous enough to answer the purpose of public instruction. Accordingly, there is delivered a course of lectures on the obstetric art, including the anatomical, physiological, and practical parts, by Valentine Seaman, M.D. As this establishment is particularly and exclusively devoted to the education of *females*, it will be easy for *women* who practice, or intend to practice midwifery, to avail themselves of the excellent opportunities which are hereby held out to them."

The following year Valentine Seaman published the first book to appear on the subject of midwifery by an American author. On the title page he calls himself Physician Extraordinary to the Lying-In Ward in the Almshouse. The little volume bears the quaint title, *The Midwives Monitor and Mothers Mirror*, and the contents are based upon the course of instruction given the previous winter in the lying-in wards of the Almshouse. Thus to the forerunner of Bellevue Hospital belongs the honor of establishing the first wards in New York for expectant mothers and of giving the first hospital instructions to women in the art of midwifery.

The statement has been repeatedly made that Dr. Valentine Seaman gave a course for trained nurses at the New York Hospital in 1800. The sole authority for this is a letter beneath his portrait in which a member of the family wrote that he gave a course of lectures to the nurses of the New York Hospital. The lectures referred to were obviously those given during the previous winter in the Almshouse as he himself states in his book.

The first outdoor obstetrical service in New York was established by the New York County Medical Society in 1823. On June 2 a committee was appointed by the Society, "to inquire into the cause of the great number of stillbirths in this city." The Chairman of the Committee was Dr. Charles Drake, one of the visiting physicians to Bellevue Hospital. The Committee was of the opinion that among the reasons for the large number of stillbirths was the abuse of ergot and the fact

“that the practice of midwifery was still too much confined to ignorant and inexperienced attendants.” The Committee recommended “the institution of a lying-in charity for the exclusive purpose of attending parturient females at their own homes.” In the minutes of the New York County Society are the regulations drawn up for the Out-door Lying-In Charity. A group of consulting and attending accoucheurs were appointed for the various districts in the city to attend the poor in their own homes.

In order that the new project should be “more effectively guarded against producing injury to any part of the profession who now receive a compensation however small from attendance upon the lower classes of the community,” it was decided “that it shall be the duty of the attending accoucheurs to lodge with the Commissioners of the Almshouse a notice of their respective residences, to attend during childbirth, free of all charge, such females of their respective districts as shall produce a certificate from a Commissioner of the Almshouse of their being proper objects of charity, and to report at the ensuing anniversary meeting of the Society the number of cases they have attended, the character of each labor, together with such other circumstances as they shall deem worthy of being communicated.”

The out-door obstetrical service functioned for only a short time. The New York Lying-In Hospital which had closed in 1822 again opened a ward in the New York Hospital sharing its facilities with the New York Asylum for Lying-In Women established in 1822. The latter institution moved to a house on Marion Street in 1830 and in addition to an indoor service established a large outdoor service. It was known as the old Marion Street Maternity Hospital and eventually combined in 1899 with the New York Infant Asylum (incorporated in 1865). The New York Infant Asylum combined with the Nursery and Child’s Hospital (incorporated in 1854) to form in 1910 the New York Nursery and Child’s Hospital.

One of the early New York obstetricians whose name is closely associated with Bellevue Hospital was Dr. John Wakefield Francis. He was born the year of Washington’s inauguration and died the year the Civil War started. For years he was *the* doctor of New York City and his big bushy head was as familiar as the City Hall. While still a student of Dr. David Hosack whose partner he later became, Francis helped establish the *American Medical and Philosophical Register*. The delight-

ful tone of this early magazine was due in a large measure to the literary ability of Francis. His scientific attainments were perhaps few but he was a popular teacher and to his associates in the profession he was "our beloved Francis," a man who was, according to Jacobi, keen eyed, warm hearted, plain spoken and generous minded.

Dr. Francis' house, No. 1 Bond Street at the corner of Broadway was the rendezvous for all the leading lights of the city. His book of reminiscences, *Old New York*, is a storehouse of information about the last days of Knickerbocker New York. There are many amusing stories about Dr. Francis. He continued to bleed his patients long after most of his confrères had given up the practice. Once during a dinner party at his house he suddenly left the table and called his wife to an adjoining room where he proceeded to bleed her. In answer to her protests he said that he perceived that she was about to suffer a stroke of apoplexy and deemed it best to avert it!

Dr. Emmet tells an interesting story about Dr. Francis. One of his best patients had been delivered of a baby when he had not even suspected pregnancy. He had been sent for at the time of the event but being away from home, someone in the neighborhood had attended the case. "Damn these hoopskirts," Dr. Francis exclaimed, "there was a time when I went to church that I could look around me and form some idea of what my income might be during the year. But now, since the invention of these damn hoopskirts, I can no longer judge of the condition of the women. I am away from home when wanted, and some young whipper-snapper is called in and gets the case."

Dr. Jacobi tells how, when he first started practice, Dr. Francis stopped him on the street one day. "They speak well of you," he said, "and you will get on; only people want sometimes some outward show. Now I am an old man, and you will not mind it when I say you ought to have another tailor." Jacobi replied, "you see, Dr. Francis, you are an old doctor, and famous, and you can afford to wear the old-fashioned clothing of the eighteenth of Brumaire and of the century of William Penn, but I cannot afford yet a better tailor."

Dr. Francis was one of the editors of the *New York Medical and Physical Journal* which was established in 1822. In the first number, one finds several contributions on obstetrics by Bellevue doctors. Francis himself contributed an article on *Pblegmasia Dolens*. Dr. Jacob Dyckman, one of the visiting surgeons to the Almshouse, wrote on a *A Case*

of *Tumour within the Pelvis Preventing Parturition*. Dr. William Moore reported *A case of uterine hydatids*. The following year Francis published a letter from John D. Hunter who while a captive among the Indians west of the Mississippi made some interesting observations on female diseases occurring among the squaws. There is also an interesting report by Drs. Francis and Beck of the first cesarean performed in the state of New York, the patient operating upon herself and recovering.

In 1825, Dr. Charles Drake, physician to the Bellevue Establishment reported *A Case of Exostosis of the Os Ischium Impeding Delivery*. The patient died of ruptured uterus.

An interesting article appeared in 1840 entitled, *A Report of Cases of Puerperal Fever Occurring at the New York Almshouse*, by Alexander F. Vache, M.D., the resident physician. The disease appeared on January 12. Of eighteen women confined in the Almshouse nine had fever and seven died. The next six women were placed in the Nursery. Of these five had fever and five died. Patients were then confined in the building devoted to negroes; out of twelve deliveries, four had fever and four died. The obstetrical service was now moved to apartments in the "middle house" of the "lunatic asylum" on Blackwell's Island. Here there were twenty-three deliveries with six cases of fever and three deaths. The total death rate during this epidemic was 31 per cent. The treatment was cupping and leeches. Among the assistants at Bellevue was Dr. Thomas F. Cock who wrote a little *Manual of Obstetrics* and became the first president of the New York Obstetrical Society.

Dr. D. Meredith Reese made a very full annual report of the Bellevue Hospital for 1848. He states that from 1845 to 1848 inclusive there were 678 births in the hospital with seventy-nine stillbirths, a rate of over 10 per cent. During the year 1848 there were 208 births with twenty-four maternal deaths of which nineteen were from puerperal fever. There were five forceps cases and six cases of embryotomy. Note that there were more destructive operations than forceps cases. Obviously a low operative incidence resulted in the loss of many babies. Fear of infection apparently deterred the doctors from interference and for the same reason cesarean section was not considered. Rupture of the uterus followed by death of the mother occurred not infrequently. From the meager records available for the twelve years from 1848 to 1859 inclusive it is apparent that the maternal and fetal death rate was

extremely high. The maternal death rate averaged ten times greater than the present rate for the city of New York and in some years it was actually twenty or thirty times greater. Puerperal infection was the chief cause of death but death from eclampsia was also common. The mortality at Bellevue was not greater than in similar institutions; there was a frightful mortality in home deliveries not only in the city but in the rural districts.

In the second half of the nineteenth century a notable group of obstetricians was associated with Bellevue Hospital. Among these were Fordyce Barker and George Elliot. They introduced the use of the hypodermic syringe in America in 1856 and 1858. They deserve our remembrance also for their defence of the use of anesthesia in obstetrics at a time when it was greatly opposed. Elliot wrote, "I would not practice medicine another day if I did not possess the power of relieving pain."

In 1876, Fordyce Barker became the first president of the American Gynecological Society. His book, *The Puerperal Diseases*, which appeared in 1874 had a deserved popularity. Barker with his immense clinical knowledge held peculiar views on the cause of puerperal infection. At the famous New York Academy of Medicine meeting in 1857 he maintained the view that it was an essential fever. Twenty years later while agreeing that it was contagious and praising the work of Oliver Wendell Holmes, he still held that the symptoms of puerperal infection were essential and not the consequence of any local lesions.

T. Gaillard Thomas was connected with Bellevue Hospital for many years. Next to J. S. Parry he did more than anyone else in this country to clarify the problem of ectopic pregnancy. He was the first in the United States to complete an extraperitoneal cesarean section. Isaac E. Taylor was a great clinical teacher and founded the Bellevue Hospital Medical College. Along with Elliot he was noted for his skill with the forceps.

With the rise of scientific medicine after 1850 the history of Bellevue Hospital becomes a part of the main current of medical history. It is probably fair to state that the influential leaders in the movement spreading from France and Germany to America were Bellevue men. The closing decades of the nineteenth century might indeed be characterized as the golden age of Bellevue for on the staff of the hospital and teaching in the medical college were the open-minded Austin Flint, Theodore

Janeway and Francis Delafield, the fathers of pathological anatomy in America; Stephen Smith and Hermann Biggs, pioneers of public health; and William Welch who was eagerly teaching the new germ theory of disease. On the surgical staff along with Smith were William Stewart Halsted, Frederick S. Dennis and Lewis Atterbury Stimson.

The big problem facing the hospital at this time was the control of infection both in surgery and obstetrics. There now appeared upon the scene a man who perhaps did as much as any other single person to make obstetrics a scientific procedure in America. William Thompson Lusk studied at Heidelberg and Berlin two years previous to 1861. At the beginning of the Civil War he returned to America and entered the Union Army. Out of his Civil War experience came his *War Letters* which were privately printed in 1911. After the war he studied at the Bellevue Medical College and then pursued further work at Edinburgh, Paris, Vienna and Prague. After a period of teaching physiology at Long Island Medical College and at Harvard he was appointed in 1871 professor of obstetrics and diseases of women and children at Bellevue Hospital Medical College, a position he held until his death.

In 1872, puerperal infection destroyed twenty-eight women of 156 who were confined in Bellevue Hospital and in 1874 from January 1 to June 11, out of 166 patients thirty-one died of infection. Lusk at this time published a clinical report on the lying-in service in which he urged the building of a separate hospital for the reception of lying-in patients. His advice was not followed but instead in 1875 the lying-in department was transferred to Blackwell's Island where two wooden pavilions were erected and placed in charge of the Charity Hospital staff. Arrangements were made by the city for several private hospitals to receive patients who came to Bellevue after labor had begun. Soon, however, these institutions refused to admit such patients. Thereupon these unfortunate women were delivered on board the transfer boat while awaiting transportation to the Island. They were attended by one of the house staff and one of the nurses from the new training school but no other provision was made for them.

At the International Medical Congress held in Philadelphia in September, 1876, Lusk read a paper entitled: *On the Nature, Origin and Prevention of Puerperal Fever*. He stated, "that the capacity of self-multiplication which septic fluids possess has been found to be coincident with the presence of certain organic bodies termed variously micrococci.

microspores, or sometimes less specifically bacteria." This statement elicited a great deal of hostility. Most teachers still believed in spontaneous generation and gave themselves scant concern about the views on puerperal infection advanced by Holmes and by Semmelweis. Lusk a few years before had heard Seyfert speak scoffingly of the misfortunes which had clouded Semmelweis' later years, asserting that his doctrines had long before been proof sufficient of his insanity.

Present as a guest at the International Congress was Lister himself who according to Lusk was listened to by a curious but unsympathetic audience. Lister visited Bellevue Hospital and complimented young Dr. Stephen Smith on his success with the antiseptic method.

Lusk himself at this period believed that there was a non-infectious form of puerperal fever due among other things to moral causes. His conclusion in regard to the infectious form, however, was that "prevention is best accomplished in hospitals by the adoption of Lister's principles," and that "the question of personal responsibility cannot be too strongly impressed upon the medical profession."

In 1877, the attention of the Grand Jury was called to the lack of facilities for obstetrical cases at Bellevue Hospital. As a result the Emergency Hospital was established at 26th Street, between Second and Third Avenues in a building which had been used as an engine house by the Fire Department. In this makeshift hospital Dr. William T. Lusk and Dr. William M. Polk began the fight to conquer puerperal infection.

Credit is due to Dr. Henry J. Garrigues for demonstrating for the first time in America in the wards of the Charity Hospital on Blackwell's Island what could be accomplished by rigid aseptic and antiseptic technique. Immediately after his first publication in 1883 Lusk introduced his methods at the Emergency Hospital and subsequently reported that there had been the greatest possible change in his service. From October, 1883 to August, 1884 there were no deaths from puerperal infection in 168 cases. Dr. W. L. Richardson at about the same time introduced the new technique at the Boston Lying-In Hospital with startling success.

In 1881, Lusk's great book on *The Science and Art of Midwifery* appeared and was translated into the French, Italian, Spanish and Arabic.

Lusk did the first successful hospital cesarean section in the United States. Harris wrote: "looking into the past records of New York City

and of the United States at large, of ten hospital cesareans in our country, Dr. Lusk's case is the first to recover up to 1887, he is the first to save both mother and child in all the history of New York, the only one of seven operators to meet with success using the Sanger Method in the United States."

Lusk died in 1897. The Emergency Hospital continued in operation until November, 1908 when Pavilions A and B of the new hospital were opened with provision for two obstetrical wards.

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