admission. One child had transient impairment of median nerve conduction with a radial fracture.

Clavicle (8) and scapular (1) fractures were noted only in patients admitted with head injuries. The only hand injury seen was a phalangeal fracture requiring internal fixation.

Discussion

Nobody can doubt that horses are potentially dangerous. This survey shows that injuries produced by horses, predominantly while riding, are more common and more serious than generally imagined. Teenage girls are particularly frequent victims, though twice as many female as male patients were admitted to hospital irrespective of age. Though more girls than boys ride horses this suggests either that female riders have more accidents or that they are less able to withstand the forces exerted.

The increased incidence of accidents in July corresponds with the school holiday period, and it may be that there is insufficient supervision of casual child riders. That the fox-hunting season from September to March is conspicuously a period of fewer accidents implies that the better-trained and more experienced rider is less vulnerable.

Though the injuries sustained are generally less severe, and lower limb injuries are less common, the range of injuries is similar to those sustained by motor-cyclists.1

Patients in this series who were wearing a riding hat do not seem to have fared better than those without, though extrapolation of figures available from motor-cycle injuries2 suggests that correctly designed, fitted, and worn headgear would lessen the severity of injury. Despite an attempt by the British Standards Institution3,4 to improve the protection given by riding hats a confusing variety is available (fig. 3) and there are considerable social and economic obstacles to riders who wish their brains to be better protected. That many riders wear inadequate hats is highlighted by the only fatality in this series—a woman whose hat had fallen off before she struck the ground.

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Medical History

Consumer Reaction: A Patient’s View of Hospital Life in 1809

W. B. HOWIE


On 6 July 1809 there was admitted as an inpatient to the Devon and Exeter Hospital in Exeter a 56-year-old minor actor named Joseph Wilde. Wilde had been one of the theatre company at Plymouth during the previous season, and one evening when playing in pantomime he had fallen and injured his knee. Application to local medical aid in Plymouth had proved unavailing, and after five months, perhaps because he was in danger of becoming a charge on the local poor rate, he went by coach accompanied by Mr. Pear, the parish clerk, to the Devon and Exeter Hospital. There on one of the weekly admission days he was examined by the receiving members of the medical staff, and having been certified by one of the surgeons—Robert Patch—as likely to benefit from treatment, and having been approved by the lay members of the Weekly Board as a suitable object for the charity, he was admitted. In all, 15 patients were admitted on that day, and the diagnosis entered in the admission register opposite Wilde’s name is simply “injury to knee.” As will appear later, it was an injury of some severity, and Wilde remained in hospital for a period of nine weeks. At the end of that time he was discharged with what is recorded in the register as “benefit.”

Joseph Wilde was no ordinary early nineteenth century patient. Hospital patients of this period came almost entirely...
from among the labouring poor, and were for the most part illiterate or at least inarticulate. Joseph Wilde was neither of these things. Born in 1753 he had been brought up at the home of his grandfather in Derbyshire, in a village some five miles from Sheffield. There, however, he must have received a reasonable education for his adult life was spent on the stage—he was for a time with the company at Norwich—and in writing poetry. Neither activity brought him great fame; his stage parts were minor ones, and his poems, with a single exception, brought him neither fame nor fortune. The single exception was his ballad of “The Dog and the Shadow.” This ballad which he wrote for an “Assembly of the Gentry of Kent” held at Faversham on 26 December 1791 proved unexpectedly successful, and he was rewarded by a large subscription raised by the gentlemen at the meeting. Even greater distinction came when he was invited to sing it before the Court at Windsor, and received, in Wilde’s own words, a “handsome present” from the Duke of York.

Poem Describing Hospital Life

With this background it is not surprising that during his nine weeks of idleness Wilde should begin to think of writing of the things he saw going on about him. By the time he was discharged from hospital he had composed a lengthy poem in three books describing his experiences. “It was begun” he wrote “without the most distant idea of ever publishing it, and merely to sooth my own mind in those hours allotted by the rules of the Hospital to repose, but which, to me, from former habits, were much too early to admit of sleep, even if I had been free of pain; and nearly half the poem was written in absolute darkness, the continual interruption making it altogether impossible to proceed in it during the day.” (Disturbance of the patient’s day does not seem, after all, to be purely a product of modern procedures.)

After his discharge from hospital Wilde sent the first part to a relative who encouraged him to print it and sent him a list of names of those who promised to subscribe. Having a wife to maintain Wilde decided to take this advice. Further subscriptions were solicited, and the list grew surprisingly; promises to buy copies coming not only from Norwich but from Plymouth and Exeter (the Bishop and Dean were subscribers) and from Sheffield where a Mr. George Wilde and a Mr. William Wilde were probably responsible for recruiting support. Curiously enough none of the physicians or surgeons of the hospital appear among the subscribers, the sole representative of the staff being Mr. Tucker, who is listed as “pupil of the Devon and Exeter Hospital.” Encouraged by this support and “excited” Wilde says in the preface “by the now too evident certainty of being for ever rendered unable to pursue my profession, I finished the poem, such as it is, and now, with trembling solicitude, lay it before a candid, and I hope indulgent public; having no other merit to plead on its behalf, but that I have endeavoured to promote the interests of piety and virtue, by the most pleasing means in my power. If there should be found in it anything which may merit the smallest degree of approbation, it is owing to its being a faithful picture of those scenes I have undertaken to represent, and which I confess, I should have been utterly unable to describe without actual experience.”

Of the three books the second and third provide the greater part of the information about the daily life and experience of the contemporary patient. The first book is largely composed of a eulogy of the hospital system and its benevolent supporters, a defence of the stage and those who perform on it, an account of his accident, and of his admission to the hospital. Care had been taken by his friends in Plymouth to furnish him with a recommendation from one of the hospital governors, as required by the hospital statutes, but they were evidently not aware that this was not enough. The statutes also required that no patient should be admitted without providing a security from some substantial person to defray the expense of the journey home when discharged. Many poor patients were found to be without means when that time came, and the Overseers of the Poor often refused to accept responsibility for them. Without such security Wilde could not gain admission, and the long and agonizing journey by coach from Plymouth would have been in vain had Mrs. Wilde and her son not prolonged herself equal to the emergency and found a guarantor for Wilde in Peter Radford, the junior surgeon on the staff of the hospital.

Wilde’s appearance before the examining medical staff and the lay governors of the Weekly Board was, for him, a trying and saddening experience. Confused by the questions put to him he felt himself the subject of ridicule. In “gravest faces” there appeared “signs of levity.” Why, he wondered, should an actor, a man whose profession required considerable ability, “fail to meet respect.” Accepted by the surgeons and by the governors, Wilde had to make his way to the wards. For a man with a knee injury this was no easy journey, for while the Board Room was on the ground floor, the wards were on the first and second floors. His guide on the journey was an unsympathetic nurse.

Th’ Herculean task remains yet unperform’d,
’T ascend the lofty stairs that lead to rest:
This he essay’d by his prelude,
Who, as he climbs, with painful steps and slow,
Signs of impatience show’d, but none of pity.
Her stormy eye gave sad presage of ill
Yet unperformed, and trouble to ensue.

In the ward Wilde was assigned a bed over which was the name of his surgeon, Mr. Patch—for each bed in the ward had the name of the physician or surgeon responsible for the patient placed over it—and here, in a little while, he was again examined by Mr. Patch to ascertain the nature of his injury more fully. As was customary in the provincial hospitals the surgeons of the Devon and Exeter Hospital had a right to take with them to the ward for teaching purposes both their private pupils and their apprentices, and on this visit Mr. Patch was accompanied by his “train of youths, observant of his ev’ry motion.” The examination over, the diagnosis made (“th’ important ligament was quite dissover’d”), and the prognosis explained to the patient (the injury was “beyond all surgery”) Patch called—

. . . . the list’ning pupilage around him,
And in the clearest terms of art explains
The case—it’s nature, and that mode of cure
Which, if pursued, had made the sufferer whole.

Typical Day in Hospital

The second book of the poem is devoted to an account of a typical day in the hospital. Each day, Wilde points out, is like another that a description of one covers them all. An interesting feature of this account is the extent to which the patients were responsible for their own care; there is little mention of any active work by the nurses. At the beginning of the day it is the ambulant patients, even if ambulation is achieved only with the aid of crutches, who brush out and clean the ward. At breakfast it is one of the patients who is sent to bring the meal from the kitchen. In the ward “the lame, and those too sick to leave their beds” are attended by “their happier neighbours” who defer their meal until the sick are fed. At night, at eight o’clock, the time appointed “for all in ev’ry ward to seek repose” it again falls to the patients to make the sick comfortable.

The strong assist the weak, make soft their beds,
And smooth officiously the sick man’s pillow.

Assisting in this way in the care of their fellows was not, however, the only task placed to the fitter patients; they were employed also in the work of the house. After breakfast a bell (a sound which, according to Wilde, the patients “least desired to hear”) summoned “the most restor’d” to the performance of their daily task. Some assisted the apothecary in the apothecary’s
shop grinding drugs with pestle and mortar, while others had the task of working the pump which brought water into the hospital.

So far as contact with the outside world was concerned, some patients were allowed out into the town to visit their friends, while those confined to bed, or less mobile, were visited by their friends and relatives after dinner. Visits to the town had their dangers, and Wilde warned those who go out to beware of friends who, in kindness, tempt them to indulge "beyond the bounds of strict sobriety." Drunkenness might result in irregular dismissal, a sentence which would deprive them of all further care in the hospital. Wilde thought the visiting of the sick in hospital of value. It was the hour "which oft most comfort brings to the lone wretch." But the time for visiting was short.

Hark, a loud voice resounds through ev’ry ward,
And warns all strangers to depart with speed.

The patients were visited each day in their wards by the apothecary—the "master" of the house, as the matron was the "mistress." This visit was in the morning, and preceded the visit by the physicians and surgeons on the days when these members of staff visited the hospital. The apothecary in his visit inquired how each patient felt, if there was any change in his condition, and if he had been receiving his proper medicines. This, however, was not all. In addition he was required, according to Wilde, to cheer the sad, chide the querulous, warn the careless, reprove the irreligious, and "wholesome counsel gladly give to all."

The visit of the apothecary appears to have been simple and friendly; the visit of the physicians and surgeons was more fearsome and elaborate.

At the fia’d hour, each cripple ready lays
His wounds all bare; those who are able haste
And stand before their own peculiar bed
Like statues rang’d, and now the whole presents
A just resemblance of that ancient fane,
Where rest the ashes of th’ illustrious dead;
And each appears a marble monument
The lame recumbent, and the sick erect;
Thus wait they all in solemn silence hush’d.

On these visits the surgeons were again accompanied by their pupils and apprentices, and together they examined the patients, the apprentices redressing wounds and undertaking venesections or any other minor procedure ordered by the surgeons. At the end of the round, "out of the hearing of the timid patient," a consultation was held of all the surgeons together on any serious cases to decide if there was need for operation—whether in one case to amputate a limb or in another to remove a stone from the bladder. A decision having been reached on any such procedure required, the patient ("his own consent first gain’d") was removed from the general ward to a "remote apartment, far from noise," which might distress him "in his sad affliction."

This awful business ended, the good doctors
(Their charitable visit paid) retire
To wealthier patients, where 'tis hop’d they meet
That due reward, which they expect not here.

A third formal visit was received by the patients each week—a visit from the Weekly Visitors; two governors appointed each week to visit the hospital unannounced and inquire into complaints, "to learn from their own lips, if ev’ry patient be well or ill attended." Wilde appreciated the intention behind these visits but felt they failed, and for a simple reason. Gratitude and awe "will often check the just complaint," and from gratitude ills done went unreported.

The third book is devoted to various crises in the hospital scene—the pain and agony endured by patients in days before anaesthesia and effective analgesics; the excitement of the accident case—a compound fracture of skull—admitted in the night and causing turmoil in the ward. Through Wilde’s verse—clumsy and stylized though it may be—there comes a vivid picture of the horror that physicians, surgeons, nurses, and apothecaries had to face in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century hospital, a fact too often forgotten in condemning them.

Discharge from Hospital

The final part of the book describes Wilde’s departure from hospital. With the other patients being discharged he appeared before the Weekly Board to express his thanks for all the care he had received. Seldom, if this part of the poem was completed before he left hospital, can the governors of the Devon and Exeter Hospital have been rewarded with such dramatic and flowery blessings as Joseph Wilde poured on them. It would have been interesting to know their response. On this, alas, the records are silent.

Throughout his stay in hospital Wilde had indeed been grateful for all the care he had received. Only two things clouded his gratitude—the first was the food, and the second "the woes unfeeling nurses may inflict, unknown to their superiors." The food appears to have been deficient both in quantity and quality. Breakfast he describes as a "frugal meal" composed of "simple viands," and "proportion’d only to the want of nature." Dinner was served "in homely guise and slender," supper was a "slight repast." There is too, one feels, a barbed shaft in the description of the diet allocated at dinner—"the most have ‘Common Diet’ once nam’d ‘low’.

But it is of the nurses that Wilde is really critical. Clearly he had suffered severely at the hands of his nurse, this "Pury in a human shape, whom not the tend’rest weakness e’er could move." His final condemnation is venomous.

... such the cruel nature of this pest,
Her tongue kills more than ablest doctors cure.

Wilde survived some years after his discharge from the Devon and Exeter Hospital. He presumably returned to Norwich, for it was there that he published in 1814 his poem "Infancy." This was intended as the first of a series of four poems—on infancy, youth, manhood, and old age—but the other three do not appear to have been published. By 1814 Wilde would have been 61 years of age. Five years before he had wondered how then shall I sustain, that am but weak
The double force of accident and age.

Perhaps both had now overwhelmed him.

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