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Burns from Warming Devices in Anesthesia—1910

To the Editor:—In their article on burns from warming devices in anesthesia, describing cases culled from the ASA Closed Claims Project, Cheney *et al.* state that the published literature contains few reports of injury due to failure or misapplication of these devices.¹

In March 1910, *The Lancet* published the text of a lecture given by Dr. Frederick Hewitt titled, "The Aesthetics of Anaesthetics",² which contains information pertinent to the report by Cheney *et al.*

"In all cases the operating table should be well warmed by hot water bottles before the patient lies upon it, and great care should be taken to see that the bottles are then removed. I have heard of several instances of extensive burns from a want of this precaution. During the operation the bed into which the patient will subsequently be moved should also thoroughly be warmed. . . . Immediately the operation is over the patient should be placed in the warmed bed and the hot water bottles removed. The importance of this last-named point cannot be over-estimated. I have, in my experience, heard of at least a hundred cases of more or less serious burns due to inattention to this point. The rule that should be followed is that under no circumstances should a hot water bottle be placed in bed with an unconscious patient. . . . Although the anaesthetist may incur the displeasure of the nurse he should, I think, always make a point, before he leaves his patient, of searching for and removing all hot-water bottles."

At least some of these injuries led to malpractice suits.³ Two examples will suffice. In *Hillyer v. Governors of St. Bartholomew's Hospital* (1909), the patient brought an action because, during an examination under anesthesia, "his left arm came in contact with a hot-water tin projecting from beneath the table, and the upper part of the arm was burned."

In *Hall v. Lees* (1904), "immediately after the operation one of the nurses appears to have applied a hot-water bottle to the patient

whilst still under the influence of an anaesthetic in such a way that the lady was severely burned before anyone was aware of the mischief. In respect of the injuries thus caused an action for damages was brought. . . . (The jury) assessed the damages at £300 (300 Pounds)." As a comparison with the median award for similar injuries in Cheney's study (\$18,000), £300 was the average annual income of a successful small businessman in England in 1910.⁴

Gerald L. Zeitlin, M.D.
Department of Anesthesia
Brigham and Women's Hospital
75 Francis Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02115

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In Reply:—"Bravo." How can you top this? *Index Medicus* has finally met its match.

F. W. Cheney, M.D.
K. L. Posner, Ph.D.
R. A. Caplan, M.D.

M. Gild, M.B., Ch.B., J.D.
Department of Anesthesiology, RN-10
University of Washington School of Medicine
Seattle, Washington 98195

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