Ethermaniacs

Taken to relieve pain, used as an anesthetic to put patients to sleep, or ingested recreationally to bring about a sweet buzz—the toxic agent’s storied past of use and abuse.

By Sterling Haynes, MD

Almost 60 years ago when I started a rural practice in Williams Lake, British Columbia, I found some of my patients were using Hoffman’s drops, consisting of one part ether to three parts alcohol, for various ills. The drops were first used by Canadian-Russian prairie women who, 100 years ago, took them to help with menstrual cramps. Soon the drops became common in Canadian rural medicine cabinets and could be obtained from a nonmedical mail order supplier in Winnipeg.

As a GP/anesthetist in the Cariboo Memorial Hospital, I used open drop diethyl ether to put people to sleep. The older docs sometimes used 1, 2, 3—a mixture of chloroform (1 part), ether (2 parts), and alcohol (3 parts) dropped over a gauze-lined Schimmelbusch metal mask. All these agents could be toxic, though I found ether to be a very safe anesthetic agent when mixed with nitrous oxide and oxygen.

The common name for ether is sweet vitriol, and ether combined with alcohol gave the user a sweet buzz. One of the early ether pioneers was Oliver Wendell Holmes. In 1870 Holmes gave the Phi Beta Kappa address to the fellows of Harvard University on his thoughts and morals of

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sweet vitriol. He relayed how he had experimented with ether vapor: The mighty music of the triumphal march into nothingness reverberated through my brain, and filled me with a sense of infinite possibilities, which made me an archangel for the moment. The veil of eternity was lifted. The one great truth which underlies all human experience, and is the key to all the mysteries that philosophy has sought in vain to solve, flashed upon me in a sudden revelation. Henceforth all was clear: a few words had lifted my intelligence to the level of the knowledge of the cherubim.1

“The veil of eternity” was never lifted for ethermaniacs like Holmes. The addiction spread across the world. Miners in southeastern Poland mixed ether with coffee or raspberry juice. In 1928 Poland forbade the sale of ether in bars and pharmacies. The use of ether was common in England from 1850 until 1930. It was used by the gentry as well as the blue-collar workers on the farms and in the mines. Among the upper classes, a cocktail consisting of a cut strawberry impregnated with two to three drops of ether dropped into a glass of champagne was popular. Three or four of these drinks could reduce you to an idiot, living in an ethereal, personal paradise.

Ether drinking was also common in Ireland. Dr Kelly’s Remedy, strong ether, was in high demand as it was said to produce a “blithesome gladness.”2 The dangers of explosions and fire with ether use are very real. Ether-induced eruptions while smoking could be catastrophic. Despite the dangers, a Bellaghy man from the county of Londonderry wrote about the pleasures of combining ether and tobacco: “I knew a man that was always drinkin it and won day after a dose uv it, he wint to light his pipe and the fire cot his breath and tuk fire inside.”2 The man’s life was saved

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when the bartender poured a jug of water down his throat.

Some of Canada’s Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish immigrants brought Hoffman’s drops to farms in the Western provinces. As well as relieving cramps, they dulled the pain of common injuries such as fractures. Ether was used where there were few doctors, but it was an addictive cure-all.

I left Williams Lake and stopped using ether as an anesthetic in 1966. I didn’t hear about ether addiction until I read the book Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas by author and addict Hunter S. Thompson. Thompson writes about “grass, mescaline, a saltshaker half full of cocaine, uppers, downers, screamers, laughers, tequila, rum, a case of beer, a pint of raw ether and a dozen amyls.” Thompson urged people to “buy the ticket, take the ride,” as he did. But he was cautious about ether: “The only thing that really worried me was ether. There is nothing in the world more helpless, irresponsible, and deprived than a man in the depths of an ether binge and I knew we’d get into that rotten stuff pretty soon.”

I don’t know if Hoffman’s drops are still being produced to bring medicinal or recreational relief, but memories of the toxic vapor certainly linger.

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