

ARTICLE XI.

Observations on the Use of the WARM BATH, in Cases of laborious Parturition; communicated in a Letter from Dr. WILLIAM DEWEES, Lecturer on Midwifery in Philadelphia, to Dr. E. H. SMITH.

DEAR SIR,

Philadelphia, July 31, 1798.

I PROMISED you the result of my experience, observation and inquiries, respecting the use of the warm bath, in cases of laborious parturition, arising from rigidity of the soft parts.—I have taken some pains to collect facts on this subject, and have endeavoured to weigh its merits with all that impartiality which ought to accompany an inquiry after truth. I think I may venture to say, with safety, that I have not been influenced by prejudice in my investigation, or directed by caprice; but, on the contrary, have, as far as my own practice and the experience of my friends will allow, given fairly the result of its effects.

The warm bath is by no means a new remedy in that species of labour, in which I have thought blood-letting of so much consequence. Few writers on the subject of midwifery have failed mentioning it among other means to overcome the rigidity of the soft parts in laborious labours, that does not depend on a mal-conformation of the pelvis. The French accoucheurs, more particularly, make frequent mention of it; yet none of them, that I am acquainted with, have laid any particular stress upon its virtues in these cases, or place any great dependence on its effects. It has been rather recommended as a probable, than as a certain remedy, and stands upon much the same footing as opium—sometimes, perhaps, succeeding, but much more frequently failing—with me it has ever been of little or no consequence; nor can I obtain a more favourable character of it from the friends I have consulted. The result, then, of my experience, inquiries and observation, may be reduced to three heads: 1st. Its being almost always inconvenient—2dly. Its being sometimes ineligible—and, 3dly. Its always being limited, and uncertain in its effects.

The very great difficulty that generally attends the warm bath, makes a very strong objection to its use; or, in other words, renders it almost impossible to be employed, as very few people are in possession of a suitable apparatus.* It might, however, on

* Whenever I mention the warm bath, I would always wish to be understood to mean the universal warm bath, presuming it to be what you, in your letter, adverted to.

extraordinary occasions, with great difficulty, be procured; but, in obtaining it, much time would be lost, particularly in the country, where this kind of labour is by far the most frequent. The lancet we may always have at hand.

It is sometimes ineligible, occasioning, in some instances, very profuse and alarming hæmorrhages. A fatal instance of this kind happened not long since in the practice of a physician in the neighbourhood where I formerly practised. It was universally attributed to the warm bath; and the Doctor himself, in a conversation with me, inclined to the same belief; at the same time assuring me he derived no advantage whatever from the warm bath, as the parts were no more disposed to yield than before; and the woman eventually suffered a lacerated perinæum. The warm bath, in this instance, evidently did mischief, by preventing the tonic contraction* of the uterus from completely taking place, whereby the vessels of the uterus were not contracted upon, and a fatal hæmorrhage ensued. This is not the only instance in which it has done harm in this way. A Dr. Tom, who had an extensive practice in this line, and who employed the warm bath frequently in these cases, informed me that it never failed producing a more than ordinary flow of blood from the uterus; and, in some instances, this happened to an alarming degree. He, however, urged, in defence of his employing it, that he knew nothing better—opium had always failed with him—and that he considered the warm bath as the dernier resource, adding, he thought it had sometimes done good. Besides, cases occur where we could not leave our patients to themselves sufficiently long to derive any advantage from the bath, was any to be expected, without running a risk of the most dreadful consequences ensuing: for instance, the case I sent you sometime since.† Here it would have been impossible to have left my patient a minute to have been placed in the bath, as it needed not only all my care, but likewise great exertion, to prevent the head of the child escaping through the anus, &c. Again, the inconvenience, nay, I may say, the almost impossibility of rendering the woman proper assistance when in the bath, will readily occur, and will be an additional objection to its use. But, above all, the extreme indelicacy that must appear when employed in that situation, was it ever practicable, would be sufficient to render it the dread of the woman, and the aversion of the modest practitioner.

With me and with my friends it has always been limited and uncertain in its effects—so much so (as I have already observed)

* By tonic contraction, I mean that power that reduces the uterus to its natural size, after having been distended.

† See Med. Repos. vol. ii. p. 24.

as to be of little or no consequence; its influence having never extended beyond partially relaxing the more external parts, and even this relaxation continuing but a short time after the bath was desisted from. I have never known it have the least effect on the neck or mouth of the uterus; nor can I find that it has ever done so unequivocally in any instance as far as my inquiries have extended. It frequently has produced no effect whatever, not even on the external parts. And should it ever relax the more external parts, no great advantage would be derived as long as the mouth of the uterus continued rigid; and I cannot find that it ever has had that effect. The yielding of the neck of the womb appears to be a distinct process, very often, from the relaxation of the other soft parts; at least they do not always keep pace with each other, having frequently seen the uterus well dilated, with a very rigid os externum, and vice versa—the one attended with an increased secretion and discharge of glairy mucus; whereas the other is not accompanied with these marks. The vagina and external parts, sometimes, after having been well relaxed, become again rigid and unyielding; but the uterus, after having been once well dilated, never (as far as my observations extend) closes, and makes resistance, until after the expulsion of the child: so that it appears that all these parts are not influenced, at all times, by the same laws or causes.

It may perhaps at first sight appear a paradox, that in some cases I should fear the warm bath producing a too great discharge of blood from the uterus, and directly after assert that in no one instance could I find it had any effect on the os uteri. But I do not perceive any contradiction here, as every body must admit, that the development of the neck of the womb, or its perfect expansion, must be a very different process from its tonic contraction. In the one instance, a peculiar arrangement of the fibres that constitute the neck or mouth takes place, so as to admit of the passage of the child, &c. Whereas, the power which reduces the uterus to its original size after the expulsion of its contents, and by which a too great discharge of blood is prevented, in the other instance, is diminished—hence hæmorrhagy. And we may, in some instances, safely, I think, conclude that the warm bath, although it does not produce relaxation; may yet prevent contraction.

With respect to fear being entertained, that the necessary quantity of blood to be drawn to accomplish the design in view, being more than can be well borne, and occasioning a tedious convalescence, you may rest assured is groundless. I do not rest this opinion upon a solitary instance, but upon many; and I particularly mentioned in the case related to you, that that woman had a rapid convalescence, notwithstanding the great quantity that was drawn. Nor have I seen any thing untoward happening (where

it has been employed to a very great extent), that could possibly be attributed to the loss of blood. Nay, I do not recollect a single instance where any thing particular supervened in all the cases I have been under the necessity of employing it; but, on the contrary, their recoveries were rapid, and without what is commonly called *pull backs*. The case related to you was chosen from several, because of the great quantity of blood that was drawn, and the very remarkable circumstances that rendered it necessary. It was by no means intended to imply that every case required an equal quantity; for, on the contrary, in cases of great rigidity, thirty or forty ounces have been sufficient, and, in some instances, a much less quantity has answered.

Besides what I have urged above, I must not omit telling you that I have experienced, in the most convincing manner, the superior efficacy of blood-letting to the warm bath. A case occurred to me that put the two remedies, I think, to a very fair trial. A woman had been a long time in labour, and from the great rigidity of the parts concerned, the midwife, entertaining no hopes of a speedy delivery, thought proper to send for a physician. He ordered the warm bath, and thirty-five drops of laudanum; these not succeeding as he expected, the woman was again ordered the bath and the anodyne. Several hours were spent in this way; the woman every hour or two was placed in the bath, and took fresh quantities of laudanum—but all without benefit. I was now called in. We agreed that the woman should be very freely bled. This was done. When, upon the loss of about thirty ounces of blood, she grew very sick and faint, her friends grew uneasy, and would not allow the bleeding to be carried to complete fainting. I was obliged to tie up her arm, and rest satisfied with what was already drawn. This, however, fortunately proved sufficient; for the parts began immediately to relax, and in about three quarters of an hour, she was made the happy mother of a living child.—This case decides most unequivocally, I think, the superior efficacy of blood-letting; and the quantity here lost was very trifling, when compared with its advantages. Nothing unfavourable happened afterwards. The woman had a speedy getting up.

I am, Sir,

Yours with respect,

WM. DEWEES.