



LEGAL



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RETAINED PLACENTA—PUERPERAL SEPTICAEMIA—DEATH.

In a recent case tried by your counsel the doctor sued was called upon to treat and care for a young married woman in her early twenties in the birth of her child. The child was born in a little farm house where there were no sanitary facilities of any kind to assist the doctor in his obstetrical procedure. A normal child was born and the two first stages of labor passed off satisfactorily. In the third stage, however, the placenta did not present itself. The doctor, after trying Crede's method for a considerable time, decided to adopt the expectant method rather than to exercise any surgical intervention. All aseptic precautions were adopted in the delivery of the child and before the child was born, and during the second stage of labor a 1½ ampule of pituitrin was administered by the physician by hypodermic. The woman was delivered of a normal girl child who is now living.

Despite the doctor's repeated and long-continued efforts to expel the placenta by means of Crede's method, he was not successful. The temperature and pulse of the patient continued normal. On the second and third days after the birth of the child, the placenta not having been removed, the doctor again resorted to Crede's method, without success. During this period hot stupes were administered. On the fifth day after the birth of the child the placenta had been expelled from the uterus and lay in the external opening of the vagina, and when found in this position was removed by another doctor who was called in to assist—such removal taking place without the use of any instruments. The woman continued normal for another day, and then her temperature went up. Eight days after the birth of the child the patient died, the cause of death being stated in the death certificate as puerperal septicaemia. The defendant doctor, however, was discharged five days after the birth of the child and did not attend the patient during the last three days of her life.

The theory of the plaintiff's case was that instead of adopting the expectant method, it was the duty of the doctor to have invaded the uterus either by hand or with instruments, and to have brought about thereby a manual expulsion of the placenta. Four doctors testified in behalf of the

plaintiff (the husband of the deceased patient), that it was not proper and approved practice to have adopted the expectant method, but that manual intervention should have been employed. Twenty-year-old text-books were cited in support of these opinions. In behalf of the defendant-doctor some four or five physicians were called one of whom was perhaps the leading obstetrician of this State, and the author of many books and articles on the subject of obstetrics. These doctors all testified that the expectant method was the proper procedure and that inasmuch as the lochia, pulse and temperature were normal between the second stage of labor and the final expulsion of the placenta five days after the birth of the child, it not only was not the defendant-doctor's duty to invade the uterus, but that it was his duty not to invade it; that the modern proper and approved practice—a practice which has been definitely recognized during only the last ten or fifteen years, however—is to leave the placenta alone and permit it to be expelled by natural means rather than to attempt manual extraction, provided there was no hemorrhage and all the other conditions of the patient were normal. There was no hemorrhage in this case.

The case attracted wide attention and doctors for many miles distant from the seat of the trial came to the court house in order to hear the evidence. On several days all of the nurses of the local hospital were brought to the court room for the purpose of instruction. In behalf of the defendant's theory numerous textbooks were cited, particularly that of Dr. John Osborn Polak and of Williams on Obstetrics. The case, as will be seen, involved an extremely interesting question of medicine. It emphasized the importance of keeping abreast of the times and at the same time it illustrated the law hazards of medical practice. On the one hand the doctor was condemned for not resorting to a practice which fifteen or twenty years ago unquestionably was the recognized practice, and on the other hand he was commended for not following the old practice, but for adopting the new procedure now thoroughly recognized and approved. The trial lasted for nine days and resulted in a verdict for the defendant doctor.