

STEWART (J.)

AN ACCOUNT OF THREE CASES
OF SCIATICA x x x x x



AN ACCOUNT OF THREE CASES OF SCIATICA AND
ONE OF PAINFUL STUMP TREATED BY
NERVE-STRETCHING.

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J. S., joiner, aged 38, when first seen in February, 1881, complained of having suffered severely from a pain in the course of the left sciatic nerve for four years. For a period of six months prior to coming under observation, he suffered so much, especially when standing, that he was unable to do any work. He has a markedly neurotic family history. He has been much exposed, and it is to "cold" contracted in roofing buildings that he attributes his present troubles. He complains of great tenderness when pressure is made over the course of the sciatic in the upper part of the thigh. He has been treated by the hypodermic injection of morphia, by blisters, by the internal use of turpentine, etc. None of the above means having any permanent influence over the severity of the pain, it was decided to stretch the nerve. This operation was performed on the 19th of January, 1881, with antiseptic precautions. On removing the dressings eight days afterwards, the wound was found united throughout. The result in this case has been very satisfactory. The pain which formerly troubled with such severity that he was unable to work, seldom afflicts him now, and then only in a mild degree. He is able to attend his work without any inconvenience.



The second case was in a man aged 58, labourer, who, for over a year previous to coming under observation, was unable to work on account of a severe pain in the course of the left sciatic and anterior crural. It is five years since the pain first troubled him, and it has been steadily increasing in severity in spite of the use of various remedies. On the 4th of October last his left sciatic was stretched, with antiseptic precautions. The wound was found united on the tenth day after the operation. The result in this case is not so satisfactory as in the previous one. He still suffers, but nothing in comparison to his former trials. He is quite able to work.

The third case was that of a man aged 23, who, for two years, has been afflicted with a most severe and rebellious form of sciatica. The employment of the usual remedies recommended in these cases had little or no effect in even mitigating the severity of the paroxysms. The left sciatic was stretched on the 28th of March last. The operation was one of much more than usual difficulty, on account of the nerve dividing after its exit from the pelvis, and the close adhesion which one of the branches (the anterior one) had formed to the surrounding tissues. Both branches were stretched. The wound healed in two weeks. It is now nearly six months since the operation was performed in this case, and as he has remained free from pain during all this time, he may be considered cured.

The fourth case is where stretching was resorted to for the relief of a painful stump. The patient, a man 70 years of age, had his left leg amputated three inches below the knee-joint five years ago. He says he has never been free from pain in the stump since that time. He is often unable to sleep at night on account of its severity. Two weeks ago his left sciatic, which was of an unusual size, was stretched. For a few days following the operation he experienced no relief, but during the last week the pains have almost ceased. It remains to be seen whether the relief will be permanent or not.

It is to the great kindness of my friends Drs. Mackid of Lucknow and Gun of Durham that I had the privilege of seeing and operating on the third and fourth cases.

Nerve-stretching is now a well-recognized and very successful means of treating obstinate cases of neuralgia. Dr. Chandler of New Jersey has collected seventy cases of rebellious sciaticas treated in this way; 97 per cent. of these cases were either cured or relieved. It is an operation that is not altogether devoid of danger. There are, at least, five fatal cases reported. In three of these, chloroform appears to have been the cause of the fatal issue. In one case I was fortunate enough to be able to take a tracing of the pulse while the nerve was being stretched. The immediate effect of the stretching was a reduction in the pulse rate from 80 to 40. This occurred within ten seconds. At the same time there was a slight fall in the blood-pressure, which was previously low, from the chloroform. It is well-known that the violent irritation of a sensory nerve can bring about stand-still of the heart. As chloroform has somewhat a similar action on the heart, it is not at all wonderful that when these two powerful factors are in operation that a fatal result has occurred. As ether has directly opposite action to chloroform on the heart, it should always be used in these operations. In two of the reported cases ether was used, and the difference in its cardiac action from chloroform was strikingly illustrated. The utmost pressure exerted in pulling the nerve while the patients were under ether could not reduce the pulse more than four beats in the minute, and even this trifling reduction was some ten seconds in being brought about. With chloroform, on the other hand, a reduction of 40 beats per minute was effected almost instantly. Further, ether does not reduce the blood-pressure, and in this lies its great safety.

