SWALLOWING FOREIGN BODIES FOR A LIVELIHOOD

BY

I. LLOYD JOHNSTONE, M.C., M.B., D.O.

A case of unusual surgical and psychological interest came under my notice in January, 1923, when I was surgical dresser to Mr. John Murray at the Middlesex Hospital. A man was admitted for the removal of three three-inch nails from his small intestine. That it was not the first time that he had been in such a case was evident from his profusely apologetic attitude to the surgeon for troubling him again, and from the appearance of his abdominal wall. It was a mass of scars, and was thrown into hills and valleys by small herniae scattered among the scars.

As dresser to the case it was my duty to inquire into his history. He gave an account of a round dozen of operations for the removal of foreign bodies from the abdomen. One of these had been at the Middlesex, so I took the trouble to look up the records and it proved to be as he described. I found a record also of an operation for double inguinal hernia which he had not mentioned, but acknowledged on being reminded of it. Before leaving hospital he wrote his memoirs and handed them to me as a reward for my interest in him. I have often thought them of sufficient interest to publish, and am stimulated to do so now by an interesting article on "Five Hundred Foreign Bodies in the Stomach," by R. Stewart Kennedy, published in the *British Medical Journal* of June 22nd.

Before giving his history in his own words it should be explained that the way he turned his ability to swallow objects, such as cutlery, nails, and screws, to pecuniary advantage was to take wagers that he would swallow the article or articles exhibited. When the "book" was large enough to satisfy him he would proceed to carry out his boast and collect the bets. He stated that he had always been able to pass anything up to two and a half inches in length. The public-house was always the stage for the performance, and doubtless a drink or two and an intimate knowledge of the hospitals of London made him reckless in tackling larger objects.

A Personal Narrative

The account of his escapades is given in his own words and spelling.

Things I have Swallowed Since 1905/7/9.

I begun my occupation in swallowing 2 pennies and was admitted into Thomas's Hospital, in City of London, under Mr. Making and was there 14 days and discharge quite well.

On the 26/11/1905, I was admitted into Westminster Hospital for swallowing 3 bits of tin, 3 Large screws, and 3 Large Nails size 4½ inches, operated on by Mr. Stoner in Luke Ward and was there 5 Weeks and discharge quite well.

In March 3/3/1906 I was admitted into St. Marys and operated on by Mr. Earnest Lane in Forester Ward for swallowing 4 Screws 4 Nails and 4 stones, Size of Nails and screws were 3 inches and the stones were this Size. [1 cm. diameter, I.L.J.] I was there 4 weeks and sent to a Convalescent home, and then discharge quite well again;

In Jan 6/1/1908 I was admitted into Charing X Hospital for swallowing half a Table knife, operated on by Mr. Fenwick in Paget ward and was there 6 weeks and discharged quite well.

Second time in this Hospital, on 16/4/1910, I was admitted into Clayton ward [? St. Thomas's Hospital—I.L.J.] and operated on by Mr. Adams for a Tin Whistle and a Pea shooter and was there 5 weeks and discharge well; When I went to Thomas's Hospital to see the House Surgeon and told him what I have swallowed he burst out laughing and said I was pulling his leg; Just to make sure, the House Surgeon had me X Rays at once, and when he discovered what I had inside my Stomach he had me up into the Operating Theatre and operated on at once, without delay. that was about 1.30 p.m. I was admitted at 12.45 p.m. 16/4/1910, so you see they lost no time.

On 24/6/1912 I was Admitted into Barts, Henry Ward, and operated on by Mr. D'Arcy Power for 5 Large Brass

Screws, 6 Large Nails which was french nails Size 2½ inches and discharge quite well again and sent to Bognor for 5 weeks in Hospital 4 weeks Bognor 5 weeks.

In 22/12/1912 I was admitted into Guys Hospital for swallowing 6½ inch Nail which took 3 operations to remove, Before being operated on there was a bet between the Night Nurse and the Student as were the 6½ inch lied, one said it was in the transfered Coln, and the Night Nurse said it layed in the Coln, to make sure Mr. John Dunn had me X Rayed and Skiagraphed and the Skiagraph showed that it was in the Coln, and then I was operated on straightaway. The Night Nurse won the Bet which was £5 0, 0 which my Dresser Mr. Taylor had to pay up.

I was admitted into the Royal Free Hospital in Marsden Ward and operated on for a Spoonhandle, and a Brass Button—the operation was performed by Mr. Pannett, their 6 weeks discharge quite well again—

I was admitted into the London Hospital in Wellington Ward operated on by Mr. Kidd for a fountain Pen, and handle of a Fork and was there 6 Weeks and discharge well.

I went to Cleaveland Street Infirmary and was operated on by Mr. Gamwill the Medical Supert of the Infirmary—the very same night I entered the Infirmary—that was on 26/5/1914 for 6 Larg Safty Pins and 5 Ladies Hair Pins and they gave me up for Dead. I never came too till Wednesday morning, operated on Monday and then came around alright. In 8 weeks and discharge quite well.

1916: I went to Middlesex Hospital when I swalld Pencil case & one nail. operation performed by Mr. Murray in Murray and now operated on the 12/1/23 in Pepys Ward for 3 Nails 3 inches Long, in Pepys Ward 3 weeks and discharged 31/1/23—admitted into Middlesex Hospital 8/1/23.

I defy contradiction

I remain

(Signed) X Y Z

Commentary

So far as I can remember no one remonstrated with the patient for the damage he caused himself and the trouble and expense he was to the hospitals, but he was almost convincing in his promises never to engage again in the practice of his "occupation." A few months later I encountered him standing with a sandwich board at the corner of Tottenham Court Road and Francis Street. Mistaking me for a University College Hospital man he soon betrayed the fact that he had favoured that hospital with a visit since he left Middlesex. Being fairly caught, he protested that he would never do it again, and he showed me a Salvation Army badge to persuade me that he had really reformed. I have not seen or heard of him since that day. Without any disparagement to the Salvation Army, it is quite possible he has been seen again at one or more of the London hospitals.

This case differs from the "usual foreign body cases" mentioned by Kennedy, "either hysterical or suicidal," and from the case he so ably describes. Though there seems to have been more or less composure and purpose in his acts of swallowing rather large foreign bodies, it is evident he was conscious of delinquency. I must leave it to the psychologists to classify his condition, and to anyone interested at the various hospitals mentioned to verify the statements thus vouched for by the man himself. That he had undergone fully that number of abdominal operations was evident from the scars without and adhesions within his abdomen.

I am indebted to Mr. John Murray for permission to publish the case.

G. Iesu (*Rev. di Chir.*, May, 1935, p. 254) records his observations on fifty patients, aged from 18 to 68, on whom he carried out a series of investigations to determine whether the type of anaesthetic and the gravity of the operation had any effect on the amount of calcaemia in the post-operative period. From the results obtained he concluded that there was no relation between operative shock and calcaemia, or between the character of the anaesthesia and calcaemia, as he found that the calcium in the blood (determined by Kramer and Tisdall's method) showed only small oscillations within normal limits. He also found that febrile states had no effect on the amount of calcaemia either before or after operation.