

Bill W. and the Belladonna Treatment

by Gary N.

For quite a number of years, I would read "Bill's Story" from the Big Book and read page 7 without a second thought. Not any more!

"Under the so-called Belladonna Treatment my brain cleared" is written on page 7 by Bill describing his treatment at Towns Hospital. What was the Belladonna Treatment?

The Belladonna Treatment was developed by Charles Towns a little after the beginning of the 20th Century as a treatment for addiction and alcoholism and by 1910 had become known as the Towns-Lambert treatment, as a Dr. Alexander Lambert, previously a physician to President Teddy Roosevelt, joined Charles Towns at Towns Hospital in New York City. The main ingredient was the deliriant atropa belladonna, also called deadly nightshade. Additional "deliriants" (chemicals used to cause delirium) were used as well.

Dr. Lambert described the belladonna treatment as follows in a 1912 article "Care and Control of the Alcoholic:"

"Briefly stated, it consist in the hourly dosage of a mixture of belladonna, hyoscyamus [also a deliriant], and xanthoxylum. The mixture is given every hour, day and night, for about fifty hours. There is also given about every twelve hours a vigorous catharsis of C.C. pills and blue mass [used to help with bowel elimination]. At the end of the treatment, when it is evident that there are abundant bilious stools, castor oil is given to clean out thoroughly the intestinal tract. If you leave any of the ingredients out, the reaction of the cessation of desire is not as clear cut as when the three are mixed together. The amount necessary to give is judged by the physiologic action of the belladonna it contains. When the face becomes flushed, the throat dry, and the pupils of the eyes dilated, you must cut down your mixture or cease giving it altogether until these symptoms pass. You must, however, push the mixture until these symptoms appear, or you will not obtain a clear cut cessation of the desire . . ."

Some have referred to the belladonna treatment as a "puke and purge" treatment.

Depending upon the patient, a variety of additional interventions might be attempted. Chloral hydrate might be used initially to put the patient to sleep if he was still feeling the effects of his spree. Paraldehyde might be used. If the person was violent or thrashing, strychnine might be injected. Finally, older alcoholics and those in a weakened condition would have with milk one or two ounces of whiskey up to four times a day, Bill W. wrote that "hydrotherapy and mild exercise helped much."

A complete treatment for an alcoholic would last no longer than 8 days.

No known record of what was actually administered to Bill W. actually exists beyond what is written on page 7 of the Big Book, and I imagine any additional information might violate doctor patient privacy.

Some people not inclined to be kind to A.A. have used this information to try to deny the "white light" experience that Bill W. wrote about that he experienced at Towns Hospital that led to his spiritual experience. I think those people entirely miss a number of points.

A.A. through the Traditions was to treat the Towns-Lambert treatment as an outside issue, and thus A.A. has never expressed an opinion on it.

Regardless of how Bill W. might have been influenced by the Towns-Lambert treatment, the counsel that he received from Dr. Silkworth remains unaltered and just as meaningful.

A very crucial moment for the development of A.A. becomes when Bill W. is offered a job by Charles Towns to become a member of the Towns Hospital staff. Had Bill W. taken the job, isn't it highly likely that most that tried to get sober through Bill W's aid would have received the Towns-Lambert treatment? Wouldn't Bill W's employment at Towns Hospital greatly changed the nature of how A.A. grew and spread from New York City? (I write most, but not all, as admission to Towns Hospital required payment of a lot of money for the times, and the money had to be paid up front. Bill W's stays there were mainly funded by his brother-in-law Dr. Strong).

Most importantly, however, while Dr. Bob was a medical man, and Bill W. had received the Towns-Lambert treatment, these two pioneered a drug free spiritual solution to alcoholism. In the light of the treatment that Bill W. actually received, I assert that the solution provided by these two is ever more remarkable once the Towns-Lambert treatment is fully understood.