case with this possible side-effect (Committee on the Safety of Medicines, Private Communication).

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Reference

DRUG AND THERAPEUTICS BULLETIN (1988) **26**, No. 3.

A Short Sharp Course of Steroids for the Patient with Depression

SIR: Since I had become afflicted with late onset asthma, a few weeks ago my GP gave me a short sharp course of steroids which had a quite remarkable effect. The combination of easier breathing and the euphoria was a most pleasant experience, and the uplift became apparent in 24 hours. Looking back, one can see that it was the stimulating effect of the iproniazid group of drugs used in the treatment of tuberculosis that drew attention to these agents as possible antidepressant medicaments. The snag about these drugs is that there is a tiresome latent period before any noticeable beneficial uplift occurs. If I were still in practice, I would like to try the effect of giving the depressed patient a short sharp course of steroids alongside the antidepressant agents, to see if this would cut short that period of waiting. Has this idea ever been tried? There is a precident for this humane kind of therapy: a short-acting barbiturate is given as a preliminary anaesthetic to cut out the unpleasant feelings that occur with the slow induction to oblivion of longer-acting anaesthetics. I am old enough to have had the experience of both methods of induction, and I know which one I prefer.

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A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

The Opium Habit

The thoughtful and epigrammatic lecture upon Coleridge by Mr. Leslie Stephen, delivered recently at the Royal Institution, once more reopens the vexed question of the influence of opium upon imaginative work. His opinion may be summed up in the words "the pity of it", since he considers that "opium ruined the power of will, never very strong, and any capacity he may have had – and his versatility was perhaps incompatible with any great capacity – for concentration on a great task." In another place he speaks of Coleridge's life affording a proof that "opium-eating is inconsistent with certain homely duties." While admitting these propositions in the main, Mr Leslie Stephen appears to have arrived at the true estimate of the author when he says that he "cannot think that Coleridge ever worked with his mind clear," since so much of the wealth of imagery and brilliance of colouring seem to have had their origin in what was formerly regarded as the directly stimulant action of opium. This action, according to Schmiedeberg, should be considered rather as a disturbance and alteration of the equilibrium of the separate functions of the brain, the area for ideation remaining intact, while sensory stimuli are beginning to lose their effect. Schmiedeberg holds that the area for ideation has thus less stimulation and guidance from without, and accordingly springs into action on its own account. While most earnestly deprecating the employment of opium as a "mental stimulant" by those who live by literature, we none the less feel that between the lines of those poems by which Coleridge will be best remembered the influence of the opium habit can be traced in its earliest, most fascinating, and therefore its most dangerous stages. The ultimate collapse which results from its frequent employment is none the less certain, though in exceptional cases it may be delayed.

Reference

The Lancet, April 7 1888, 692.

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