

The Words of Hospice

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FROM ITS PRELITERATE BEGINNINGS, MEDICINE HAS CONSISTENTLY BEEN A passive enterprise: It responds rather than initiates. It declares, "Only when you feel ill, might you then use my limited talents;" and even when preventive medicine, with its quarantines and vaccines was invented, it was in response to a widespread call for the creation of a specific branch of the profession to create barriers to the spread of disease. And so, as new health-related needs emerge, medicine responds by exploiting or reordering its limited magic – and its associated vocabulary.

Consider, for example, the capacity of modern medicine to extend life; but this prolongation, however, may come at an egregious cost: unremitting pain, hopelessness, a loss of dignity and self-control; and a life confined to an intensive care unit. Medicine – at first reluctantly – has responded by creating a new branch of medicine: Palliative and Hospice Care, with its special vocabulary, Board requirements and eligibilities.

And its special vocabulary?

Palliation: A key Latin word, *pallium*, meaning a cloak, gave rise to a family of similar words, some with divergent meanings. As a verb, palliate has come to mean to excuse, to forgive, to extenuate. The Latin, *pallidus*, emphasized paleness and the movement toward pallor (and numerous related terms such as pale, pall, appall.) Medicine has adopted the word to define an agent, agents or procedures which mitigate or relieve without curing the underlying disease.

Comfort: From late Latin there is the word, *comfortare*, meaning to make strong (prefix, *com-*, as an intensive meaning 'with,' and the root *fortis*, meaning 'strong.' Thus, earlier, the word had implied encouragement or strengthening (as in "aid and comfort to the enemy.") Currently, comfort is taken to mean 'to soothe, to console, to relieve the symptoms of an affliction.'

Hospice: There are a number of words derived from the stem, *hospes*, originally meaning a guest or even a host. Hospital, as the name of a defined institution for the infirm or aged, did not emerge until the 15th Century in Western Europe, and virtually all at that time had been managed by religious institutions. The names of such institutions clustered around some variant noun such as hospice, hotel, hospital, hostel, or ostler. The word, hospital, in current parlance (as a place to treat sickness) became the dominant mission of current hospitals by the 18th Century.

Terminal: The word, terminal, as in Latin, *terminus*, originally denoted a visible boundary or a finishing point. The word was applied initially to school schedules declaring that it embraced 'a period of time;' or, when applied to railroad facilities, terminus became a synonym for train station, with scheduled stops. Terminal (palliative) care, however, defines those special interventions designed to enhance the patient's sense of comfort, dignity, and the feeling of being in limited control of one's life. A family of related words has evolved from the Latin, term *terminus*. These cognate terms include terminology, exterminate and determine.

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Grave-robber flees from a corpse that has come to life in this illustration from the National Library of Medicine. The artist was Jacques Winslow (1669–1760). During his lifetime and the period of the Fenner-Dorrance trial, securing corpses for dissection in anatomy labs by medical students and doctors was not an uncommon practice.

The Plot Thickens

Medical students strike again

During the trial, Dr. Pardon Bowen testified to the necessity of acquiring anatomical knowledge by dissection, “if we are meant to qualify ourselves to preserve the lives and limbs of our fellow creatures.” He justified the propriety of this particular corpse dissection, stating, “he was a stranger, entirely unknown and had no friends or relatives whose feelings could be hurt.”

When Dr. Daniel Knight, of Pomfret, Conn., took the stand, he testified that two hours after the re-burial of the corpse in a pauper’s cemetery under the direction of Judge Dorrance, he and four other medical students returned and “took up said body to a house of Mr. George Sugden (or Suggins) on Westminster Street.”

He stated, seemingly in contradiction to Dr. Bowen’s testimony, that they felt they had the right, having purchased the body at an exorbitant price from the “mob” from Scituate.

Drs. Horatio Bowen and George W. Hoppin swore neither Dr. Pardon Bowen nor Judge Dorrance knew anything about the unearthing of the body after it was re-buried.

According to a “Report of the Case” printed in 1802 by Bennett Wheeler, editor of the *United States Chronicle*, the questions asked Dr. Knight by one of Gov. Fenner’s attorney proceeded as follows:

Q. What operations were performed on the dead body the same night after you had removed it from the grave to Mr. Suggins?

A. *The body was opened and the entrails taken out.*

Q. What was done with the entrails?

A. *They were buried in said Suggins’ shop which had no floor.*

Q. What knowledge have you of any operation, which was performed on the dead body afterwards?

A. *The operation of dissection was begun the following night, which was continued for several nights until completion.*

Q. Who was the principal operator in dissecting the body?

A. *Dr. Pardon Bowen.*

Q. What other persons attended and assisted in dissecting said body?

A. *To the benefit of my recollection, Dr. Benjamin Dyer, Dr. Comfort A. Carpenter, Dr. James Mason, George W. Hoppin, John Eddy and Horatio G. Bowen.*

The Purloined Corpse: A Winter’s Tale

MARY KORR

RIMJ MANAGING EDITOR

On the snowy and wintry night of February 12, 1799, a distraught stranger hung himself by a Scituate roadside. Upon discovery of the dangling corpse the next morning, the town’s coroner examined the body, ruled it a suicide, and ordered a quick burial.

Perhaps not surprising during the days of grave-robbing, a notorious legal case ensued from this unfortunate occurrence and played out over several years. It was the central characters, for the case became a newspaper sensation, who garnered the attention. They included a prominent physician, Dr. Pardon Bowen; a shadowy band of medical students, RI Gov. Arthur Fenner and the Hon. John Dorrance.

The libel and slander trial of Judge Dorrance vs. Gov. Fenner was tried in the Court of Common Pleas, Providence, in December 1801.

Did Dr. Bowen secure a corpse from Judge Dorrance for the price of one beaver hat?

The case was a sensation and the courtroom was packed. “Its mythology was enlarged by men on street-corners and grossly and merrily embroidered by the scurrilous press of that place and period,” wrote Ben C. Clough, a Brown University professor who published “The Corpse and the Beaver Hat” in an anthology in 1947.

Central to the legal proceedings were the following questions:

- Did Dr. Bowen secure the aforesaid corpse from Judge Dorrance for the price of one beaver hat? Furthermore, did Dr. Bowen pay a delegation from Scituate \$40 in hush money?
- Did Gov. Fenner falsely and maliciously spread the above-stated charges in order to defame Judge Dorrance (a prominent Federalist) to undermine his (unsuccessful) campaign for re-election as a justice in the Court of Common Pleas?

Gov. Fenner pleaded not guilty to the charges, but did not deny that he claimed on numerous occasions Judge Dorrance, “having had the body confided to him for a decent burial, sold it for dissection to Doctor Pardon Bowen for a beaver hat, and furthermore, had the impudence to wear the hat in town meeting, when he



Governor Arthur Fenner

presided as moderator." Gov. Fenner also acknowledged carrying a newspaper report in his pocket and showing it to constituents.

The Procurement

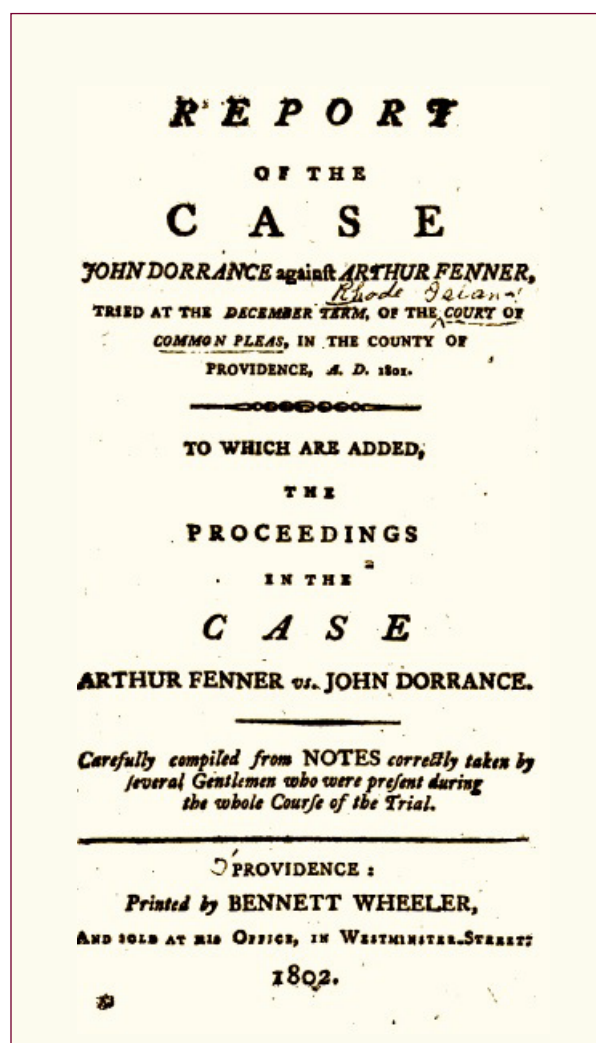
Dr. Horatio G. Bowen, a medical student at the time of the events, testified that "immediately on the report being circulated that a man had hung himself in Scituate, it was proposed to procure it for a dissection; which was unanimously agreed by the whole, and a night appointed for bringing the body away."

One student sought the professional advice of a Dr. Joseph Mason on how to best procure the body. "I advised him to send someone to observe where they buried the body and afterward to go out in the night and take it up and bring it into town," Dr. Mason testified.

The students followed his advice.

However, stalwart Scituate citizens took notice of the empty grave and followed the sleigh tracks to the yard of Dr. Benjamin Dyer. (He and Dr. Bowen taught anatomy in a large room near Dr. Bowen's residence known as the "Theatre.")

At the trial, Dr. Pardon Bowen testified: "That I ever bought this body or any other from Mr. Dorrance for a beaver hat for the purpose of dissection or any other purpose I solemnly declare to be false. At the same time it is true that I presented to Mr. Dorrance a beaver hat, but this hat was



for essential services rendered me in the arrangement of my own affairs."

However, he acknowledged meeting and paying the Scituate delegation \$40 to settle the matter and had them sign an agreement, which stated: "Said Pardon's agreeing to have above said body decently buried under direction of John Dorrance, Esq."

The Verdict

"The verdict was for the defendant, although the defense of truth broke down," Rhode Island historian Thomas Williams Bicknell, in Vol. 6 of *The History of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations*, wrote in 1920. "Governor Fenner was the political idol of the day and his personality was large, powerful, impressive, magnetic, and withal so courteous and popular as the State executive, that court and jury were both turned from a just judgment according to the law and testimony."

Judge Dorrance appealed and the second trial began in January

1802. He asked for a change of venue to Massachusetts or Connecticut; it was denied but resulted in a new jury which Judge Dorrance considered so biased he dropped the suit. The court awarded Gov. Fenner \$10,000 plus costs.

And what of the twice-purloined corpse? Dr. Hoppin testified a Dr. Cleveland framed the bones into a skeleton, which he took with him when he left Providence. ❖