Dr. Adoniram J. Shurtleff: How “Uncle Ad” Became an “Ad” Against Self-Administration of Anesthesia

Affectionately called “Uncle Ad” by his nieces and nephews, Dr. Adoniram J. Shurtleff (1841 to 1885, left) had expanded his Massachusetts dental practice from the town of Natick to an office at Boston's Hotel Boylston (right). Shortly after 6 PM on February 26, 1885, a close friend had followed Dr. Shurtleff's instructions and had administered a proprietary brand of nitrous oxide to the 43-year-old dentist, who, ironically, was suffering from a severe toothache. At 10 PM the janitor discovered “the doctor lying upon the floor dead,” and “the body was not cold.” The dead man's left hand clutched a piece of tubing “with one end of it held tightly between the teeth [and] the other of course attached to the cylinder,” which was “completely empty of [laughing] gas.” A few months after Shurtleff's death, a leading dental authority, Dr. Albion Dudley, published a wise admonition: “No dentist should ever undertake to administer an anesthetic to himself under any circumstances.” (Copyright © the American Society of Anesthesiologists' Wood Library-Museum of Anesthesiology.)

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