

ANESTHESIOLOGY REFLECTIONS FROM THE WOOD LIBRARY-MUSEUM

Extending the Anesthetic Duration of Nitrous Oxide with Valerian, an Herbal Sedative



Following the Civil War, American concern mounted about the anesthetic safety of ether and of chloroform. After reviving the use of nitrous oxide for brief anesthetics, dentists and physicians had to hurdle new obstacles. Because most nitrous oxide administrations lacked supplementary oxygen, a roughly 50-s inhalation of 100% laughing gas might yield as little as 30 s procedurally for tooth extraction or other minor surgeries. To combat this problem, entrepreneurs in the 1880s began marketing proprietary formulations of herbally supplemented nitrous oxide. Early on, valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*, left) became a botanical candidate for extending the otherwise fleeting anesthetic duration of laughing gas. Known to both Hippocrates and Galen, this mildly sedative herb, valerian, has been peddled to the public for more than 24 centuries (McMahon's "Oil of Valerian," right). Sadly, unscrupulous practitioners soon began reassuring patients who wished to avoid nitrous oxide that herbally supplemented laughing gas was a completely unrelated gas...when that was just not the case at all. (Copyright © the American Society of Anesthesiologists' Wood Library-Museum of Anesthesiology.)

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