

ANESTHESIOLOGY REFLECTIONS FROM THE WOOD LIBRARY-MUSEUM

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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