

The Addict Who Invented Modern Surgery

At the beginning of the drug war in 1914 a public health survey of narcotics addicts found that “a very large proportion of the users...were respectable hard-working individuals in all walks of life...” It seems shocking now to hear that 80 percent of these “dope fiends” had jobs, homes and reputations but the medical literature is filled with addicts on maintenance doses who functioned normally throughout their lives. One of the most remarkable was Dr. William Stewart Halsted.

He was already a prominent surgeon in Manhattan while still in his twenties. Shortly after the Civil War Dr. Halsted discovered that cocaine could be used as a local anesthetic – a major leap for modern surgery. But Halsted was also experimenting on himself and he found that when he injected the drug into a vein he got a rush that was better than sex.

To wean him off his ferocious cocaine habit Halsted's friends chartered a schooner and shipped him off to the Virgin Islands. They managed to keep him clean for a couple of months but as soon as he hit the beach he started shooting up again. In a last ditch effort he checked himself into a hospital in Providence and through sheer will power he was completely cured. Or so the story went.

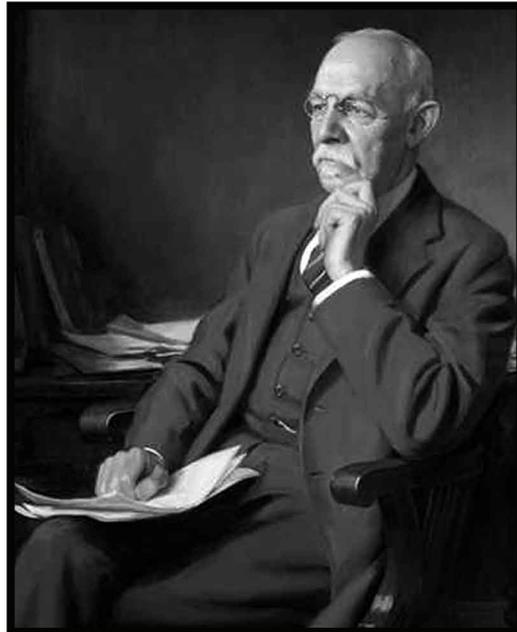
Halsted's skill and ingenuity as a surgeon made him world famous and in 1886 he joined three other renowned physicians to

create Johns Hopkins Hospital. His private life was as exemplary as his dazzling medical career and he died peacefully at 70. The fairytale would have ended there except for the little black book.

On the eightieth anniversary of Johns Hopkins the book was opened according to the instructions of its author, Sir William Osler, and in it was the “secret history” of the Hopkins. It turns out that Halsted had cured his cocaine habit by switching to morphine. In other words, one of the four founders of Johns Hopkins was a morphine addict for over forty years, and while one colleague knew all about it, the others never suspected. Throughout his career Halsted tried to kick but he was never able to get by with less than 180 milligrams a day. “On this,” said Dr. Osler, “he could do his work comfortably and maintain his excellent physical vigor.”

Halsted's story is revealing not only because it shows that a morphine addict on the proper maintenance dose can be productive. It also illustrates the incredible power of the drug in question. Here was a man with almost unlimited resources—moral, physical, financial, medical—who tried everything he could think of and he was hooked until the day he died.

Today we would send a man like that to prison. Instead he became the father of modern surgery.



Common Sense for Drug Policy

www.CommonSenseDrugPolicy.org www.DrugWarFacts.org
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