

patients over 45 with a history of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease should receive salbutamol nebulised with air to avoid carbon dioxide narcosis.

Conclusion

Treatment of mild and moderate asthma attacks should continue as at present, with either air driven nebulisers or metered dose inhalers and holding chambers. This should not cause hypoxaemia. However, if the signs of a severe or life threatening attack are present (see box), oxygen before and after treatment with a β_2 agonist nebulised with oxygen should be the standard treatment wherever the patient happens to be. We urge the British Thoracic Society to review this issue when it updates its guidelines.

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Laudanum in Lakeland

Among the Christmas reading in our family last year was *A Passionate Sisterhood* by Kathleen Jones. This carefully researched book begins with the young lives of the two sets of sisters—the Frickers and the Hutchinsons—that Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Southey married into, and with Wordsworth's own sister, Dorothy. Then, in its later chapters, Coleridge's daughter Sara and Wordsworth's daughter Dora, together with Southey's daughters, take centre stage.

More may often be learnt about the medicine of earlier times from lay people than from what their doctors wrote about it. The lay sources are more vivid and impartial in describing the treatments offered and their effects. Nowhere can this be truer than in the rich documentation left by the Lakeland poets, their extended families, and their wide acquaintanceship; and what it reveals about their dependency on opiates is astonishing to modern eyes. Some, for instance Coleridge's daughter Sara and the "opium eater" De Quincey, were franker about their addiction than others; but the extent to which all resorted to laudanum goes a long way to explain the invalidism, insomnia, bowel complaints, and failed pregnancies that ran through their lives. Here, just one brief quotation must suffice to illustrate this. It comprises three verses of "Poppies" from *Pretty Lessons in Verse* written by Sara Coleridge for children and, in particular, for her son Herbert.

The poppies blooming all around
My Herbert loves to see,
Some pearly white, some dark as night,
Some red as cramasie ...

When poor mama long restless lies
She drinks the poppy's juice;
That liquor soon can close her eyes
And slumber soft produce.
O' then my sweet my happy boy
Will thank the poppy flow'r
Which brings the sleep to dear mama
At midnight's darksome hour.

Kathleen Jones' book, meant primarily to display the lives and talents of the Lakeland sisterhood, also serves to show how prevalent was the use of laudanum in the nineteenth century, as a remedy for every complaint from toothache to the pain of advanced malignancy. Its side effects did not go unrecognised, but there were no good alternatives and it afforded rapid relief. Whether it fed or impaired imaginations as fertile as Coleridge's can only be speculated on, but its influence on any of the writers who regularly took it can not be ignored. Nor, presumably, was the literary circle of the Lakeland poets out of the ordinary in their use of the drug, except in the amount of written testimony they left about its effects. Two centuries later, at least as far as "respectable" society is concerned, we probably live in a less, not a more, drug dependent age than they did.

The Passionate Sisterhood was published by Constable in 1997 but is unaccountably out of print. Copies are still obtainable from good bookshops.

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