

## Ethermaniacs

Taken to relieve pain, used as an anesthetic to put patients to sleep, or ingested recreationally to bring about a sweet buzz—the toxic agent’s storied past of use and abuse.

By Sterling Haynes, MD

**A**lmost 60 years ago when I started a rural practice in Williams Lake, British Columbia, I found some of my patients were using Hoffman’s drops, consisting of one part ether to three parts alcohol, for various ills. The drops were first used by Canadian-Russian prairie women who, 100 years ago, took them to help with menstrual cramps. Soon the drops became common in Canadian rural medicine cabinets and could be obtained from a nonmedical mail order supplier in Winnipeg.

As a GP/anesthetist in the Cariboo Memorial Hospital, I used open drop diethyl ether to put people to sleep. The older docs sometimes used 1, 2, 3—a mixture of chloroform (1 part), ether (2 parts), and alcohol (3 parts) dropped over a gauze-lined Schimmelbusch metal mask. All these agents could be toxic, though I found ether to be a very safe anesthetic agent when mixed with nitrous oxide and oxygen.

The common name for ether is sweet vitriol, and ether combined with alcohol gave the user a sweet buzz. One of the early ether pioneers

was Oliver Wendell Holmes. In 1870 Holmes gave the Phi Beta Kappa address to the fellows of Harvard University on his thoughts and morals of

**Among the upper classes, a cocktail consisting of a cut strawberry impregnated with two to three drops of ether dropped into a glass of champagne was popular. Three or four of these drinks could reduce you to an idiot, living in an ethereal, personal paradise.**

sweet vitriol. He relayed how he had experimented with ether vapor:

The mighty music of the triumphal march into nothingness reverberated through my brain, and filled me with a sense of infinite possibilities, which made me an archangel for the moment. The veil of eternity was lifted. The one great truth which underlies all human experience, and is the key to all the mysteries that philosophy has sought in vain to solve, flashed upon me in a sudden revelation. Henceforth all was clear: a few

words had lifted my intelligence to the level of the knowledge of the cherubim.<sup>1</sup>

“The veil of eternity” was never lifted for ethermaniacs like Holmes. The addiction spread across the world. Miners in southeastern Poland mixed ether with coffee or raspberry juice. In 1928 Poland forbade the sale of ether in bars and pharmacies. The use of ether was common in England from 1850 until 1930. It was used by the gentry as well as the blue-collar workers on the farms and in the mines. Among the upper classes, a cocktail consisting of a cut strawberry impregnated with two to three drops of ether dropped into a glass of champagne was popular. Three or four of these drinks could reduce you to an idiot, living in an ethereal, personal paradise.

Ether drinking was also common in Ireland. Dr Kelly’s Remedy, strong ether, was in high demand as it was said to produce a “blithesome gladness.”<sup>2</sup> The dangers of explosions and fire with ether use are very real. Ether-induced eruptions while smoking could be catastrophic. Despite the dangers, a Bellaghy man from the county of Londonderry wrote about the pleasures of combining ether and tobacco: “I knew a man that was always dhrinkin it and won day after a dose uv it, he wint to light his pipe and the fire cot his breath and tuk fire inside.”<sup>2</sup> The man’s life was saved

*Continued on page 253*

---

*This article has been peer reviewed.*

---

Dr Haynes is a retired general practitioner living in West Kelowna. He was a country and urban doctor for almost 40 years in BC and Alabama. Dr Haynes’s new e-book *Where Does It Hurt Now?* will be available on Amazon.ca in the fall.

**VANCOUVER—EXAM/THERAPY ROOMS**

Medical exam rooms, therapy room, and boardroom space available in new modern medical clinic. Medical rooms are spacious, bright, and fully furnished with custom-made cabinets and desk, exam room furniture, and equipment. Office ideal for group or private sessions of counseling and psychotherapy; comes furnished with executive desk, executive chair, sofas, 50-inch TV, private phone line, computer, and Wi-Fi. Lease rates include utilities, basic office and medical supplies, and MOAs. For more info please contact [raz@elitemedicalassociates.com](mailto:raz@elitemedicalassociates.com).

**VANCOUVER—MED OFFICE SPACE**

Class one private surgery centre: fully equipped, recently recertified, all policies and procedures up to date. Perfect for eyes, infertility, dentals, plastics. Great location, excellent lease terms. Contact Shauna at [Purtzki Transitions: 866 227-0070](mailto:Purtzki Transitions: 866 227-0070) or [shauna@purtzki.com](mailto:shauna@purtzki.com).

**VANCOUVER—SPACE**

Large, sunny office space to share with a family doctor or pediatrician. Low overhead. Great secretary, and nicely decorated reception and waiting room. Would have access to two exam rooms. Located at 460 Nanaimo Street on corner of Pender. Available immediately. E-mail [mabeimers@hotmail.com](mailto:mabeimers@hotmail.com).

**VICTORIA—OFFICE SPACE**

Office space for sale in beautiful Victoria (625 sq. ft.), with or without current family practice. Two examining rooms, utility room, wash-room/shower, large doctor's office—room for two sharing. Multispecialty professional building with X-ray, lab, pharmacy, free parking. Priced to sell. Replies to [islandneighbour@gmail.com](mailto:islandneighbour@gmail.com).

**WEST VANCOUVER—CLINIC**

New EMR medical clinic in the quaint seaside village of Ambleside, West Vancouver, is looking for full-time/part-time colleague to join existing doctors, Drs I.A. Hyams and U. Zandy. This large clinic is oceanfront and in an ideal location with a beautiful view and plenty of parking. Clinic has nine exam rooms and three doctors' offices. We welcome walk-in and family medicine patients. Shared expenses make this very affordable, and the ideal place to practise and feel like you are on vacation. For further information contact [admin@bellevueclinic.ca](mailto:admin@bellevueclinic.ca) or 604 836-7638.

**vacation properties****FRANCE—FRENCH VILLA**

France/Provence. Les Geraniums, a three-bedroom, three-bath villa. Terrace with pool and panoramic views. Walk to market town. One hour to Aix and Nice. New, independent studio with terrace also available. 604 522-5196, [villavar@telus.net](mailto:villavar@telus.net).

**WHISTLER—HOUSE**

Plan your next holiday. Beautiful four-bedroom house, 5 minutes from Whistler Village. Quiet, private, ideal for groups of 8 to 10. All the comforts of home. Contact Beth Watt or Peter Vieira at [beth\\_watt@telus.net](mailto:beth_watt@telus.net) or 604 882-1965.

**miscellaneous****ACCOUNTING**

Rod McNeil, CGA—tax, accounting, and business solutions for medical and health professionals. Specializing in tax and other issues faced by health professionals at various career stages for the past 8 years. Taxes are complex and practitioners are often unaware of solutions available to them and are not making the most of their professional corporations. My goal is to help you keep more of what you earn by minimizing overall tax burdens when possible. Website [www.rwmcga.com](http://www.rwmcga.com), e-mail [rodney@rwmcga.com](mailto:rodney@rwmcga.com), phone 778 552-0229.

**FREE MEDICAL RECORD STORAGE**

Free record storage for closing practices. Retiring, moving, or closing your practice? RSRS offers compliant storage/scanning of patient records at no charge to the physician. No prohibitive fees to patients. Canada's leading paper and digital medical record storage provider since 1997. 1 888 563-3732, ext. 2, [info@rsrs.com](mailto:info@rsrs.com), [www.RecordSolutions.ca](http://www.RecordSolutions.ca).

**MED BILLING SERVICES**

Looking for an efficient and accurate billing agent? I provide billing services using my own billing software or can remotely connect to your EMR for added convenience. For more information e-mail Caitlyn at [caitlyn@tolhurstmedical.ca](mailto:caitlyn@tolhurstmedical.ca) or call 778 214-3471.

**PATIENT RECORD STORAGE—FREE**

Retiring, moving, or closing your family or general practice, physician's estate? DOCUdavit Medical Solutions provides free storage for your active paper or electronic patient records with no hidden costs, including a patient mailing and doctor's web page. Contact Sid Soil at DOCUdavit Solutions today at 1 888 781-9083, ext. 105, or e-mail [ssoil@docudavit.com](mailto:ssoil@docudavit.com). We also provide great rates for closing specialists.

**TRANSCRIPTION SERVICES**

Canada-wide since 2002. Telephone dictation and digital recorder files. We offer excellent quality, next-business-day service. Family practices, clinics, and all specialties. Patient notes, letters, reports, medical-legal, and IMES. PIPEDA compliant. Call 416 503-4003, toll free 1 866 503-4003, visit [www.2ascribe.com](http://www.2ascribe.com), or e-mail [info@2ascribe.com](mailto:info@2ascribe.com). Check out our dictation tips at [www.2ascribe.com/tips](http://www.2ascribe.com/tips).

*Continued from page 254*

when the bartender poured a jug of water down his throat.

Some of Canada's Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish immigrants brought Hoffman's drops to farms in the Western provinces. As well as relieving cramps, they dulled the pain of common injuries such as fractures. Ether was used where there were few doctors, but it was an addictive cure-all.

I left Williams Lake and stopped using ether as an anesthetic in 1966. I didn't hear about ether addiction until I read the book *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* by author and addict Hunter S. Thompson. Thompson writes about "grass, mescaline, a saltshaker half full of cocaine, uppers, downers, screamers, laughers, tequila, rum, a case of beer, a pint of raw ether and a dozen amyls."<sup>3</sup> Thompson urged people to "buy the ticket, take the ride,"<sup>3</sup> as he did. But he was cautious about ether: "The only thing that really worried me was ether. There is nothing in the world more helpless, irresponsible, and depraved than a man in the depths of an ether binge and I knew we'd get into that rotten stuff pretty soon."<sup>3</sup>

I don't know if Hoffman's drops are still being produced to bring medicinal or recreational relief, but memories of the toxic vapor certainly linger.

**References**

1. Holmes OW. Mechanism in thought and morals: An address delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard University, June 29, 1870 (1871). Boston, MA: Boston, J. R. Osgood & Co; 1871.
2. Calwell W. Ether drinking in Ulster. *BMJ* 1910;2:387-389.
3. Thompson HS. *Fear and loathing in Las Vegas: A savage journey to the heart of the American dream*. New York, NY: Random House; 1972.