

INDEX  
MEDICUS

Corson (H)

CHOREA AND ITS TREAT-  
MENT BY CIMICIFUGA  
RACEMOSA.

BY  
HIRAM CORSON, M. D.,  
OF CONSHOHOCKEN, PA.

MEDICUS

REPRINTED FROM THE  
*Medical and Surgical Reporter,*  
OF NOVEMBER 6, 1886.

312



# CHOREA AND ITS TREATMENT BY CIMICIFUGA RACEMOSA.

By HIRAM CORSON, M. D.,

Of Conshohocken, Pa.



In the *Maryland Medical Journal* of April 24, 1886, there is an article on chorea by Spencer M. Free, M. D., of Baltimore, which came to me a few days ago, and which has induced me to offer your readers some remarks in reference to its treatment.

This excellent paper by Dr. Free, so replete with information in all that relates to the causes, symptoms, pathology, and treatment of the disease as known by authors of the present time, is well worthy of attentive perusal. But so greatly was I amazed not to find the cimicifuga—black snake-root—spoken of as a remedy, though he remarks, "without a careful search we have come upon thirty-nine forms of treatment," that I am impelled to offer him one more remedy, a remedy greatly to be preferred to the one of which he says, "The one remedy which is the main reliance of the great majority of practitioners is arsenic." Quite half a century ago there were three country physicians in Pennsylvania who attracted attention by their valuable contributions to the *Am. Journal of the Medical Sciences*, in relation to their treatment of diseases so frequently met with by physicians. They were Samuel Jackson, of Northumberland; Ezra Michener and Jesse Young, of Chester county. Their articles were eagerly looked for, and their advice and modes of treatment thankfully received. Many a young practitioner was helped and cheered by their valuable counsel, their truthful reports of cases of illness, and the value of remedies as witnessed by them; and thus were enabled

ofttimes to bring comfort and health to patients by means and appliances before unknown to them. At present I have only to speak of the last-named. Writers from the days of Cullen in the last century to the present time agree in their general history of the disease, their inability to refer it to any special cause or to discover by post-mortem examination characteristic pathological changes. They all speak, too, of the same remedies—of their utility in some cases, their utter inutility in others—of cases lasting for months and years, in defiance of the one remedy by all of them deemed the best, namely, arsenic.

Although I have used cimicifuga racemosa in every case which has come to me in more than fifty years, and always successfully in a brief time, I feel that justice would not be done the subject by giving my experience without preceding it by the experience of Dr. Jesse Young. It is a matter of regret that your space will not allow me to give his whole article, his thoughts and reflections on the subject, instead of merely giving briefly his cases.

The *Am. Journal of Medical Sciences* of February, 1832, on page 310, has "Observations on the Remedial Powers of the Cimicifuga Racemosa in the Treatment of Chorea," by Jesse Young, M. D., from which I take the following notice of four cases. He says:

"It is a very popular medicine both for man and beast. it is used in infusion or decoction chiefly as a pectoral medicine. . . .

Who first used it in chorea I have no means of learning.

"1. Four years ago a son of Joseph Fairlamb, aged 11 years, was attacked; one side was affected and was in almost constant motion, except when he was asleep. During more than four months his physician was using all his efforts to arrest it, but without the least benefit resulting. An *old woman* then told him that the black snake-root would cure it. She told him to give a teaspoonful (of the root) three successive mornings, then omit three, and so on, till he gave it nine times. He told me when he had given six portions the boy was almost well, and when he had taken his nine portions he was perfectly cured, and has so remained.

"2. In the month of March of the present year a daughter of Mr. Isaac Hall was attacked. His physician was called, and after treating it for a month without any good resulting, his physician agreed to his using the snake-root, of which he had heard, as used in the above case. After taking three portions, her symptoms were much improved; and after six doses she was entirely well; the other three were, however, given, and she remains well at this time. In this case it puked severely almost every time it was given.

"In Mr. Fairlamb's boy, it did not vomit, but several times, though not always, made him quite sick.

"I now determined to watch its effects and ascertain whether it would cure by its own intrinsic properties (not as an emetic) or whether these reported cures might not be mere coincidences, and, in reality, the consequences, perhaps, of former treatment.

"3. On the 12th of September I was requested to see Mrs. ———, aged nineteen years; married two months; believed *not to be pregnant*.

"The affection commenced two weeks ago, but so gradually that she was not aware of anything serious being the matter till within a day or two, she has got so bad as to be almost constantly in motion with the left side; it does not prevent sleep; health good; could detect no cause, save that her father had been once affected, when a boy; in his case, caused by fright, and was cured, or got well, in two or three years, after using much medicine without benefit; but believes it was the cold bath that cured him at last,

"I ordered an emetic of tart. ant. with a view to its impression rather than its evacuant effect, to be followed by calomel and jalap next day; and after this to purge every morning with cream tart. et jalap till I could

procure the snake-root. On the 20th, I took a quantity of it to her, but was startled when I found the affection had extended to the other side, and was tenfold aggravated; her arms, her legs, her head, face, tongue, and every muscular part of the system appeared to be in continual, irregular, alternate motion; she could only, with great difficulty, articulate so as to be at all intelligible; the power of deglutition was suspended to a very great extent; she could not walk one step, nor support herself erect without assistance, nor could she sleep, day or night, on account of the constant twitching and jerking of the muscles. Such was her condition when she began to take the snake-root—one teaspoonful of the powder three times a day, before eating—but if it sickened her when taken on an empty stomach, to take it after instead of before meals, in any pleasant vehicle, as molasses, preserves, etc. On the 25th, I visited her again and found a great change for the better—had walked the day before several hundred yards, could speak and swallow as well as ever she could, and could sleep well at night. Her arms were still somewhat affected. Ordered the medicine discontinued for two or three days, then used again as before.

"October 3 found her so well that a person who was not aware of her having the affection would not notice anything ailing her; a few more doses were used, once or twice a day, for a week, and she was well, and is so at this time."

His remarks are too long to copy here, but it never sickened if not taken on an empty stomach; did not at any time purge, sweat, or act as a diuretic, but "caused an uneasy feeling amounting to almost an ache through all her extremities every time she took it, which would continue from one to three hours; that *it alone cured* must be obvious to every one."

4. The fourth case spoken of by Dr. Young was told him by his friend, Dr. Gregg, who said: "I should have had a case to treat had it not been for the black snake-root." He had met a man in whose family he practiced who told him "his child had Saint Vitus' dance, and he had heard of Hall's daughter's case, and if the snake-root don't cure her I will call on you."

Dr. Gregg saw the man a short time after and learnt that the patient had been cured in a few days by the article.

There is much more in Dr. Young's article which would deeply interest your readers, but I must be content with merely adding his conclusion: "Neither *a priori* reasoning nor

professional erudition can ever direct us to the peculiar properties or effects of any of our vegetable productions; they can only become known from repeated trials and experiments. In this class exactly stands the *cimicifuga racemosa*, in chorea and probably in other nervous affections. Let it be fairly tried, and on these trials let its merits stand or fall."

The above was published fifty-four years ago last February, and yet to-day, in a paper published by a physician living in a city, a man conversant with medical literature, and earnest and diligent in his search for remedies useful in chorea, does not name it with his twenty-nine. Is this evidence that, tried on its merits, it has failed? Or is it not more probable that it has been but rarely tried, and that those who have tried it have failed to report, and thus it has not been brought to the notice of Dr. Free?

Be this as it may, I took Dr. Young at his word, gave it a trial of fifty years, and now report it almost if not quite a specific in chorea, and of great value in many other affections.

I ought to say here that Dr. Jesse Young was probably the first regular physician that ever used the black snake-root in chorea—at least the first who published an account of its use; for in a note by the editor appended to the communication, he says: "We are not aware of the remedial powers of the black snake-root having been noticed by any writer on the materia medica, but Dr. Physick informed us nearly ten years ago that he had known the plant, given in doses of ten grains every two hours, prove successful in the treatment of chorea in several instances."

Dr. Wm. Cullen, Professor of the Practice of Medicine in Edinburgh from 1776, for nearly twenty years, and whose "First Lines in the Practice of Medicine" was a text-book in the early part of this century in the University of Pennsylvania, does not speak of the *cimicifuga* as a remedy, but says: "Dr. Sydenham proposed to cure the chorea by alternate bleeding and purging. In some plethoric habits I have found some bleeding useful; but in many cases I have found repeated evacuations, especially by bleeding, very hurtful."

Dr. John Eberle, Professor of Materia Medica in Jefferson Medical College as early as 1828, and whose "Treatise on the Practice of Medicine," published in 1830, was then considered to be a most valuable work, names almost as many modes of treatment and different remedies as Dr. Free, and with as little confidence in any one of them. He wrote:

"In a young lady, seized with chorea in consequence of suppressed catamenia, I directed her to be bled  $\zeta$ xij, and to take a pill of ext. colocynth 3 grs., calomel gr. iss, tart. ant.  $\frac{1}{10}$  gr. every night, and a small dose sulph. mag. every fourth day. In the course of two weeks she was bled four times, and the disease disappeared during the third week."

Dr. Eberle did not name the snake root, had probably never heard of it, and I should probably have been led to resort to some one of the modes of practice spoken of by him, had it not been that the recommendation of the *cimicifuga* by Dr. Young met my eye. From that day to this I have relied on it alone, and in every case it has given speedy relief. I brought it to the notice of our County Medical Society, and some of the members can bear similar testimony to its control over the disease. This confirmation of Dr. Jesse Young's testimony might perhaps justify me in saying nothing more on the subject, but possibly the brief narration of a few of the many cases which have come under my care, will better satisfy your readers of the safety and value of the remedy that I offer them.

In June, 1836, Mrs. W., a young woman advanced to the middle of the third month of her first pregnancy, became ill with chorea, and I saw her on the first day of June. It was, I think, in 1834, that Dr. J. K. Mitchell called the attention of the profession to irritation of the spine as a cause of rheumatism and some other affections, and the good results of treatment derived from cups, leeches, and external irritation over the spinal column. Pustulation by tartar emetic ointment was very fashionable, and "disease of spine" was, like malaria now, a phrase used for nearly every departure from health. I find that from the first of June until the 16th, external irritation of the spine with tonics was mainly relied on in her treatment, and by this time she was confined to bed in a most pitiable and helpless condition. I then directed one teaspoonful tr. *cimicifuga* after each meal; her recovery was rapid, and I ceased attendance on the 12th, from which time she attended to her household duties, and passed through her confinement on December 15th, and had a good "getting up." I will now skip the cases of the next fourteen years.

Case 2. In 1850, a girl of eleven years, of rather unusual growth, was affected with chorea, and though living in Conshohocken, was taken to Newark, N. J., to the old family doctor. From the time of Dr. Hamilton until the time of which I write, the active

purgative practice he was zealous to promote, a practice to which I have already alluded, was everywhere resorted to by physicians to a greater or less degree, and the old family doctor put her under a full course of that treatment for three months, with a gradual reduction of health, and such an increase of the disease that when she was brought back by the mother, hopeless of cure, she was in a most pitiable state—I need not describe it, it paralleled Dr. Young's case. I was called on account of the mother being informed by a friend, whose child had been relieved of an attack by the snake root, advised by me. Her motions were almost incessant—even when asleep they were not wholly absent—speech and swallowing difficult, confined to bed, and with so idiotic an appearance that the mother, a woman of family pride, evidently dreaded her recovery, confident that her intellect would be impaired. I directed the infusion, made as before, from properly prepared roots. She began its use April 4, 1850. I ceased to attend her on the 30th, when she was walking out, but called again on the 4th of May and found her entirely well. Her health from this time was excellent. This case was the result, I think, of too close study at home, with no exercise such as children get when at school in the country, she not being allowed to attend the school to which the *workingmen's children* went. I will now skip the next twenty-five years, in which I had several cases, and speak of a few which have occurred since, or within the last ten years.

Case 3. On the 29th of April, 1875, I was asked to see a boy of about eleven years of age, who, though still going to school, had for a few weeks been affected with chorea, to a degree that caused children to laugh at him and sometimes mock him. He was able to eat quite well, and though his limbs were much affected and his face full of grimaces, had not been taken from the school. As the anxiety and efforts of the schoolroom are the prolific source of chorea in children, he was at once kept at home and put on the use of tinct. black snake-root (prepared by myself from good roots gathered at the proper time). My last visit to him, he being apparently well, was on the 15th of May, but the medicine was continued for two or three weeks longer, a dose or two daily. His recovery was complete.

Case 4. Allow me to report a case which I did not attend, but which was so like the one just reported in age and kinship and in its early symptoms, though so widely different in its course and in the long suffering

which he endured, and in his final recovery by the use of the *cimicifuga*, that I think the two cases should be placed near to each other, to show the utter inutility of the remedies used by his physician, and the prompt and efficient action of the snake-root, used even without the supervision of a doctor.

In the early part of 1874 a boy in his eleventh year had an attack of chorea which followed a light attack of rheumatism of the right knee, from which he had suffered a month or two before. The chorea began with twitching of the right side. Very soon a physician was called, and by the end of a fortnight, then the beginning of June, he was unable to talk, had great difficulty in swallowing, could not feed himself, and was soon unable to continue in bed, so a bed was made on the floor for him; but even then so greatly did he twitch and jerk that he oft-times would roll out of it on to the floor. Remedies were tried in rapid succession during the coming winter and following spring without availing much, but yet he could swallow better, and could articulate so as to be understood. A small wagon was then built for him, in which he could lie at full length, and be dragged about by his friends or the neighbors' children. I need not go further into details; suffice it to say that for three years more he continued to be affected, but exercise in a carriage constructed to enclose his body, and with a rim on which he could rest his arms, and with rollers under it, which enabled him to move about his room, after some months invigorated him, he then being able to eat well, and he became able to walk out of doors. The cold bath was tried two weeks, then he was taken to Atlantic City during the bathing season, and was treated there in a regular hot-bath establishment. After that the electrical cure was tried, under the supervision of Dr. Playfair, of Philadelphia; but none of these things availed much. When at Atlantic City his appearance on the street when his parents were taking him a short distance to the hot-bathing establishment would immediately attract the attention of those who saw him, and lead to unpleasant remarks. I had several times seen him when he was being taken about in the small wagon, and was pained to witness his motions and contortions. Thus during more than four years he suffered on, though his physician had anxiously and faithfully plied his remedies one after another till his list of those of reputed value was exhausted. I can well believe this, for the father was a most intelligent man, with ample means; the mother

an anxious and loving woman, prepared to spare neither labor nor expense to bring health to her only son; but the skill of the physician had failed, the resources of specialists had proved useless, when in February, 1879, while he was in this pitiable condition she was informed by one of her friends who had heard of his case that I had several times used the snake-root tea with success. The father, knowing the plant, procured it. It was freely given, with marked advantage, and he was soon well. This very day, October 10, 1886, I have heard the history of the case from the lips of the parents; have heard this emphatic declaration of the mother: "I believe if he had had the snake-root tea in the beginning, he would have soon been well." He is now a strong, healthy young man. He and the boy of the preceding Case 3 are cousins. They began in a similar way; yet the one was treated by the infusion or decoction of the black-snake-root at first, and was soon well; the other was given some of the twenty-nine remedies reported by Dr. Free; remedies, many of them—nearly all of them—in use before and at the beginning of this century, all of them often tried, sometimes with apparent success, but so often failing that authors were content to say, as matter of encouragement, "that in the failure of remedies to arrest it, it is devoid of danger, and may terminate spontaneously."

Coming still nearer to the present time, I will briefly notice three cases living within about two hundred yards of each other. I was invited, May 26th, by a young medical friend, to see with him a young girl with the following history: A school girl, who was 13 years old in June, 1885, and who passed naturally through her third menstrual period March 5th, was, during the next fortnight, to be examined for promotion, and of it she seemed to have much dread. She had but one more day to be questioned, the 26th of March, and when she rose in the morning she was morose, disregarded the directions of her mother, who became alarmed at the change in her behaviour, and on inquiring of her the cause of it, was told by her "that she felt bad and did not know what ailed her." A friend coming in detected the disease, and a physician was sent for. She went to bed; soon the choreic symptoms rapidly developed. She could not talk after that day, nor rise from her bed. What treatment was used is not known to me, but I do know that the medical treatment went on steadily under the almost daily supervision of the physician, the patient as steadily growing

worse, until May 24th, when he informed the mother that "there is no hope." When two days later I saw her, she was indeed in a most suffering condition. It seemed dangerous to put any fluid into her mouth, so great was the difficulty of swallowing. She could not speak a word, her left side seemed paralytic. She had had almost no food for days, and there was a large bed-sore on her back, over the lower lumbar vertebra (produced by the continuous movement of her body), and also a contracted condition of the muscles of one side of the neck, which gave evident suffering when she attempted to swallow. Her face was fatuous in expression to a great degree. We arranged to give fluid ext. *cimicifuga*, prepared by Dr. Baker, of Norristown, made from roots gathered in proper season, dried and preserved properly, one teaspoonful *after* every meal and one at bed-time, if she could bear so much. The mother says that she saw a change for the better on the first day. Three days after our first visit we saw her again together, and the improvement was quite perceptible. She improved rapidly, so rapidly indeed as to astonish and greatly please my young friend, who for only a week had had exclusive charge of her. On the 3d of June, only seven days after she began to use the snake-root, she began to talk—imperfectly at first, of course, for she had not made an effort to do it for more than two months; in about ten days more was sitting up, and even walking about the room, and on the 25th of June walked a few hundred yards to her aunt's moving. When we think of the deplorable condition in which we found her on May 26th, and know that on the 25th of June she was out walking, and could talk as well as before she was sick, for all of which I have this story from the mouth of her mother and herself, we ought to regard the *cimicifuga* as being a valuable remedy, inasmuch as no other medicine was used, unless it was something at bed-time.

Case 5. On Sept. 14th was called to see a tall, gangling youth of 19, who, on May 3d, was entirely well of an attack of rheumatism which had confined him to bed for nearly three weeks. He lived about 300 yards from the case just narrated. I found him sitting in an arm-chair, but with numerous jerkings, contortions and grimaces, and exhibiting a peculiar wilfulness quite unnatural to him, which caused his aged grandparents to fear harm from him. He was at once put on the use of the *cimicifuga*, the fluid extract. He improved daily, and on the 18th his father, in order to comfort the old people, came from

Philadelphia and took him with him (he walking to the Spring Mill R. R. station, a quarter of a mile away), promising, too, to give the medicine as directed. On the 24th, the patient returned to Spring Mill by the train, greatly improved; again, a week afterwards, made a visit to Spring Mill, coming up from Philadelphia alone—apparently well save some imperfection in talking. Since then I have not heard of him save that he had ceased to take the medicine—not a very safe omission, even though he felt himself to be well.

While in attendance on the above case, I saw in the road a boy of about 11 years of age afflicted with chorea, and was told that he lived within 300 yards of the home of the boy of 19 whom I was visiting. Rather unusual to find in one small, scattered village, three cases of chorea affected at the same time. This pale little fellow attracted my attention as well as my pity, and, on inquiring of one who knew him, I was told that he had been afflicted for nearly if not quite three years; that a physician had attended him for a long time without effecting much, and that he had been subjected to other means of cure, and recently had been under the electrical treatment in Philadelphia.

Case 6. Allow me to speak of yet another case. In the spring of 1886 I was written to by a family in Norristown to visit a sick child. The object in sending for me was not to give it medicine, but to get him to the institution at Media for the care of imbecile children. When I was told the child's history, and was informed that "it had fits almost daily—sometimes two or more in a day"—I told the parents it was useless to attempt to get him there, as children subject to fits were not received. They desired me to see him, and he was brought into the room, they having previously given me his history as follows: "He will be eleven years old next July, the twelfth of eighteen children"—the mother now only 44 years old—"until he was four he was a smart boy. One day one of the girls took him out walking, in the afternoon, and returned towards evening carrying him, and he crying and paralyzed on the left side, yet he could talk. At 7½ p. m. he had another stroke, and fits for twenty-four hours, since which time he has never talked. For more than two years he had fits; was confined to bed, and could not walk; but gradually he grew stronger, ate heartily, and at the end of his two years' illness in bed he began to get about the floor, and finally to walk, and would then sometimes be a week without a fit." The month before I saw him he had three or four fits per week. When

he came into the room to me he had hold of his mother's hand, and with his fingers thrust into a very large mouth, and it wide open, he jumped and capered along, jerking one leg, with the knee bent, as high as the thigh would allow it to come; he laughed, too, idiotically. The peculiar motion of one of his legs, his idiotic laugh, and capacious open mouth, impressed me with the idea that his case was possibly at first an acute severe chorea, that the fits were of the kind called "spells" by some persons, and not real epileptic fits. So greatly did this view of his case take hold of my mind, that I proposed to the mother to get a bottle of Dr. Baker's fluid ext. *cimicifuga racemosa*, and give him a teaspoonful after every meal; and also directed for him 20 grains bromide potassium every night at bedtime. The first week after he began to take the snake-root he had three fits; the next week two, after which he was three weeks with only one at the end of that time; and after that had none until the 22d of July, when he had one; then one in a week. Now, October 8th, he has not had any for four weeks. It was about April first when I first saw him, and the treatment was begun. According to this statement, he had during the month of April, after the medicine was begun, only six spells, or fits; then from about the first of May till July second—nearly two months—none; since then one about every week for three times, and since September 10th not one. But this is not all the improvement: his health is greatly better, he now walks quite well, with no jerking of his leg, tries to talk, knows what is said to him, when told to go sit down or to come to any one. Should he want a drink, will bring the empty cup for them to get it; if he needs food, will bring a knife. The bromide potassium was continued but a few days, for he soon began to sleep well, and when it was discontinued he slept as well as when using it. And here I ought to say that I have for many years used the *cimicifuga* for the purpose of enabling nervous people to sleep, and it has served them well. A member of our county society, who has often heard me speak of its value, when asked for his experience in relation to the effects of snake-root, gave me reports of its great value as a remedy in chorea, and also as a quieter of the disturbed nervous system, thus inducing sleep. At this time he has a lady who has had for several years a most painful and distressing affection, for the relief of which she for a long time took large doses of anodynes; but now whenever she becomes so nervous as to be unable to sleep, a single half teaspoonful of



Baker's fluid ext. cimicifuga will quiet the nervous restlessness and induce sleep. We have much talk about "nervous exhaustion," and the value of "strychnine and iron, and a little good whisky, as tonics to build up the system," and arsenic is the universal favorite in chorea; but I feel assured that all of them combined have not half the value of the infusion or fluid ext. of black snake-root, a plant that is accessible to every Pennsylvania doctor, as it grows on almost every wooded hillside in our State; and yet but few physicians are acquainted with it—cannot point it out, though it towers above nearly all the other plants of the forest.

Coming back from this digression to my poor Norristown boy, let me ask my readers if they do not see much similarity between this case and the one so suddenly taken, and so severely held until the time I saw it with my young friend; and might not this latter

patient have gone on from year to year as the boy did, if not arrested by the cimicifuga? Again, might not the boy, who had been four or five years dosed with medicine and shocked by electricity, but was still strongly affected by chorea, have continued for years but for the control of his perturbed nervous system by this potent remedy, the snake-root, gathered by his father on the neighboring hill, and prepared for use by his mother? In every county in the State, I presume, it can be found; any mother can prepare and administer it; and were this done early in the cases of chorea which are found in every township in the land, physicians would not be mortified, and the inefficiency of our profession exhibited before the public by the appearance on our streets of young persons helpless in limbs and contorted in features by this disease of the nervous system.





