

## The Last Illness of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.

Mary Chisolm, '58

We might regard Dr. Samuel Johnson's final illness as an event for which he, to a greater extent than most men, had been preparing all of his life. We are told that he inherited from his father a vile melancholy, which caused him a perpetual irritation, fretfulness, impatience, and gloom. This, combined with his suffering from scrofula and its accompanying poor eyesight, his being grossly overweight and his inherent awkwardness and abruptness of manner, caused him to be often very dejected and languid. From a very early age he was acutely conscious of his health and lack of it. Many called him hypochondriac. But he was interested in order that he could know to correct his faults, "I would not . . . gratify my own indolence by the omission of any important duty, or any office of real kindness."

We find first mention of Dr. Johnson's illness during his seventy-third year. He writes of having had many slight illnesses during the early part of that year, and he had much weakness, so that he needed to rest while walking. He realized, though, that "health begins after seventy, and long before, to have a meaning different from that which it had at thirty . . . and he that would rather grow old than die has God to thank for the infirmities of old age."

By early 1783, the interested spectator of his own illness had become an unruly patient. He was at

times confined to bed for several days; he was pale and had difficulty in breathing and thought that he was very ill. He was bleeding frequently from his asthmatic complaint and his legs were beginning to swell. Opium gave him relief from his symptoms but he protested against its use and said that it should be given only in extreme necessity and with the utmost reluctance. His largest daily dose was three grains; he always attempted to take only two. In June of that year a paralytic stroke at night deprived him of speech. He experienced some mental confusion at that time, and because the integrity of his faculties was his chief concern throughout his illness, he composed a prayer in Latin. He knew that the Latin was not excellent, but the fact that he realized its shortcomings was added assurance of his mental capability. Dr. Johnson had always been interested in the study of physic, so he now undertook to precribe for himself: "I think that by speedy application of stimulants much may be done. I question if a vomit, vigorous and rough, would not rouse the organs of speech to action." His actual treatment at the time was to take two drams, and then two more, to rouse his vocal organs. Whether due to this or not, he regained his speech with passable articulation within a fortnight. "My voice is distinct enough for a while, but the organs being still weak are quickly weary." In September he

suffered severely from his second attack of gout, and he developed a sarcocele which his physicians thought might necessitate surgery. He recovered from these only to develop an asthma so severe that he must sit up, and a greater degree of dropsy.

The winter of 1784 was very severe, and Dr. Johnson was confined to bed for six weeks. Again his own comments about his illness are most interesting: "My legs and thighs are very much swollen with water, which I would be content if I could keep there, but I am afraid that it will soon be higher". He blamed much of his illness on the inclement weather and the northern climate, and hoped for relief when the fine weather would come. He planned that his next winter might be spent in Italy. He wrote various friends at this time, asking them to consult with physicians of their acquaintance about his case. He was treated with expectorant and diuretic in the form of vinegar of squills, but the powder hurt his stomach so much that it could not be continued. He was able to have rest and sleep only by using laudanum and syrup of poppies to relieve his asthma. In April he did improve and suffered from a cough only. "My asthma is, I am afraid, constitutional and incurable; but it is only occasional and unless it be excited by labour or cold gives me no molestation . . . the weather indeed is not benign, but how low is he sunk whose strength depends upon the weather." He remembered that Sir John Floyer had lived to the age of ninety although he suffered from

asthma. Dr. Johnson read this worthy physician's book on the subject, and decided that his asthma was of a different type. In August his "vis inertiae of the pectoral and pulmonary muscles" was overcome and he was more comfortable. He still feared the water which was rising, though it was not rising very fast, but believed that the remission of one disease would enable nature to combat the rest. He had begun again to take squills, and had very good faith in them.

He had been visiting in the country during the summer, but our arbitrator of the English language returned to London for the winter because his financial state would not permit a trip to Italy. His friends thought that the smoky atmosphere would not be conducive to his recovery, but he had originally gained relief there from his hydropic tumor, which he considered to be his original and radical disease. During the autumn he continued to enjoy the company of his friends and the pleasure of their correspondence; he finally was forced to forgo his beloved club where he and his friends had met for many years to converse. His vigour and vivacity of mind remained, and he was always interested in those who he could help by introductions, advice, or money. Throughout he was in complete command of his senses. "Protracted existence is a good recompense for very considerable degrees of torture," he wrote. He was determined that he would not capitulate to his disease, but that, when the time came, it would conquer him.

In early November he went to Oxford, where he spent a pleasant week with the master of Pembroke College. While he was there his final entry was made in his journal of his illness, "Aegri Ephemericis". He returned to London and his asthma and dropsy were more violent than they had been. He was terrified of death which he knew was approaching quickly, and when he thought that his surgeons had cut too tenderly in their efforts to relieve his dropsy, he cut deeper. In early December he was unable to read. He resolved to take no more physic and only a little food. He was finally persuaded to eat well because

he was told that lack of food might debilitate his mind. Finally he became very resigned to his fate. He was pleased when he was told that he would be buried in Westminster Abbey.

Dr. Johnson was pleased with his life, and deemed his conversation as important as more writing would have been. He was not displeased that the England of his day did not give him much recognition; "Men of merit have their intellectual superiority; let them cherish this and not ask for other rewards". His brilliant and perceptive mind was with him and with his friends until the end.

# PLEXONAL

## Composition

Sodium barbitone	- - - - -	45 mg. (gr 3/4)	C.N.S. sedative
Sodium Phenobarbitone	- - - - -	15 mg (gr 1/4)	C.N.S. sedative
Sodium Sandoptal	- - - - -	25 mg (gr 3/8)	C.N.S. sedative
Scopolamine hydrochloride	- - - - -	0.08 mg (gr 1/800)	C.N.S. and parasympathetic sedative
"Dihydroergotamine-Sandoz"	- - - - -	0.16 mg (gr 1/400)	C.N.S. and sympathetic sedative

## Action

PLEXONAL is a sedative with a wide spectrum and therapeutic margin, acting predominantly on the central nervous system. Excellent sedation is obtained with submarginal doses of the individual ingredients. This explains the absence of undesirable side-effects and after-effects even upon administration of relatively large doses of PLEXONAL over a prolonged period of time.

## Indications

All conditions of central excitation of mild to medium severity, especially in presence of over-activity of autonomic functions:—Anxiety neurosis, psychic tension, apprehension, psychomotor excitation, emotional liability, night terrors, insomnia due to any cause except pain.

## Average dosage

As a daytime sedative: 1 tablet 3 or 4 times daily.

As a hypnotic: 2 to 4 tablets ½ hour before retiring.

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