

An Alcoholic's Savior: God, Belladonna or Both?

CHARLES B. TOWNS HOSPITAL
293 Central Park West New York, New York
For ALCOHOLISM and DRUG ADDICTION

ANY PHYSICIAN having an addict problem is invited to write for Hospital literature.

This institution has specialized in addictions for over 30 years. Its method of treatment has been fully described in THE JOURNAL A. M. A.; in The Handbook of Therapy, from the A. M. A. Press; and in other scientific literature. The treatment is a regular hospital procedure, and provides a definite means for eliminating the toxic products of alcohol and drugs from the tissues. A complete Department of Physical Therapy, with gymnasium and other facilities for physical rebuilding, is maintained. Operated as an "open" institution. Physicians are not only invited but urged to accompany and stay with their patients.

Located Directly Across from Central Park

POTIONS An advertisement for a facility offering treatment once thought to cure alcoholism and drug addiction.

In October 1909, Dr. Alexander Lambert [boldly announced](#) to a New York Times reporter that he had found a surefire cure for [alcoholism](#) and [drug addiction](#). Even more astounding, he stated that the treatment required “less than five days.” The therapy consisted of an odd mixture of belladonna (deadly nightshade), along with the fluid extracts of xanthoxylum (prickly ash) and hyoscyamus (henbane). “The result is often so dramatic,” Lambert said, “that one hesitates to believe it possible.”

Dr. Lambert was hardly a quack looking for headlines. He was widely known as [Theodore Roosevelt](#)'s personal physician, a professor of medicine at Cornell Medical College and an expert on alcoholism. Dr. Lambert had years of experience taking care of thousands of alcoholics at Bellevue Hospital's infamous “drunk ward.” In fact, it was on this storied hospital ward where he experimented with the belladonna cure.

He had obtained the recipe from a layman named Charles B. Towns, who, in turn, claimed to have learned about it from a country doctor. In 1901, Mr. Towns opened a [substance abuse](#) hospital in New York City at 293 Central Park West, between 89th and 90th Streets. He needed Dr. Lambert because he lacked a medical degree and, hence, professional credibility; Dr. Lambert needed Mr. Towns, because for all his medical knowledge, he had relatively little to offer his patients in terms of an effective treatment.

The Towns Hospital attracted only the wealthiest alcoholics and addicts, who gladly paid exorbitant fees for a treatment that “successfully and completely removes the poison from

the system and obliterates all craving for drugs and alcohol.” Because of Prohibition and the paradoxical rise in alcoholism in 1920, the Towns Hospital restricted its practice to drying-out well-to-do alcoholics.

Perhaps the most famous patient was William Griffith Wilson, better known as Bill W., the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. In the early 1930s, Mr. Wilson was consuming more than two quarts of rotgut whiskey daily, a definite health risk according to Alexander Lambert, who found in his copious research that consumers of cheap or bootlegged alcohol were far more prone to [seizures](#), [delirium tremens](#) and brain damage than those who drank the expensive stuff. Between 1933 and 1934, at his wife’s urging and on his wealthy brother-in-law’s dime, Mr. Wilson was admitted to Towns four times. The cost upon admission was steep: up to \$350 (roughly \$5,610 today) for a four- to five-day stay.

Although Mr. Wilson made some progress in temporarily abstaining, he relapsed after each of the first three hospitalizations. It was around this time that he reunited with a drinking buddy named Ebby Thacher. Unlike previous times, when they went out on wild binges, Mr. Thacher told him that he quit booze and was a member of the Oxford Group, a church-based association devoted to living on a higher spiritual plane guided by Christianity. As a demonstration, on Dec. 7, 1934, Mr. Thacher took Mr. Wilson to the Calvary Mission on East 23rd Street and Second Avenue, where the most drunken of New York’s [Depression](#)-era down-and-outers went to be fed and, it was hoped, “saved.”

A few days later, a drunken Wilson staggered back into the Towns Hospital. There, his physician, William D. Silkworth, sedated him with chloral hydrate and paraldehyde, two agents guaranteed to help an agitated drunk to sleep, albeit lightly. This was especially important because the medical staff members had to wake patients every hour for at least two days to take the various pills, cathartics and tinctures of the belladonna regime.

On the second or third day of his treatment, Mr. Wilson had his now famous spiritual awakening. Earlier that evening, Mr. Thacher had visited and tried to persuade Mr. Wilson to turn himself over to the care of a Christian deity who would liberate him from the ravages of alcohol. Hours later, depressed and delirious, Mr. Wilson cried out: “I’ll do anything! Anything at all! If there be a God, let him show himself!” He then witnessed a blinding light and felt an ecstatic sense of freedom and peace. When Mr. Wilson told Dr. Silkworth about the event, the physician responded: “Something has happened to you I don’t understand. But you had better hang on to it.”

Hang on to it he did. Indeed, this experience ultimately led Mr. Wilson to abstain from alcohol for the remaining 36 years of his life and to co-create the novel program whereby

one alcoholic helps another through a commitment to absolute honesty and a belief that a higher power can help one achieve sobriety.

Long before Mr. Towns touted his cure for alcoholism, belladonna (as well as henbane) was known to cause [hallucinations](#). The hallucinations brought on by alcoholic delirium tremens tend to be a transmogrification of things the alcoholic is actually seeing or experiencing into a realm of sheer terror. A stray coil of rope may appear to be a poisonous cobra; a pattern on the wallpaper seems to transform into a poisonous spider. But they can also be tactile, like the sensation of insects crawling on the skin. Other hallucinations associated with [alcohol withdrawal](#), or alcoholic hallucinosis, tend to be brief and involve hearing accusatory or threatening voices.

Belladonna hallucinations, on the other hand, are typically based on recent discussions the person had but become far more fantastic. Many times, these visions appear to fulfill the wishes one might have had during the inspiring experience.

Several decades after his 1909 announcement, Alexander Lambert took great pains to distance himself from belladonna. Although Dr. Lambert found the detoxification process to be useful in the short run, he became discouraged by its toxicity, its propensity to induce hallucinations and the fact that many of those he treated at Bellevue relapsed and returned for subsequent treatment. Something more was needed, he declared, and that task fell to Bill Wilson and an alcoholic physician from Ohio named Bob Smith, who created Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935.

Were Bill Wilson's spiritual awakening and influential sobriety the products of a belladonna hallucination shortly after his discussions with his friend Ebby Thacher? Could they have been incited by his alcohol withdrawal symptoms? Or did something else happen to him that science cannot explain? In the end, millions of people who have benefited from Alcoholics Anonymous and similar 12-step programs around the world would say that such pharmacological, physical or spiritual parsing hardly matters.

A version of this article appeared in print on April 20, 2010, on page D5 of the New York edition.