Artifacts and Archives/Archives et artefacts de la pratique médicale

Bovell's Obstetrical Set

Cased set of obstetrical instruments, made by W. Smith, London, England ca. 1835. Brass-bound velvet-lined mahogany case with engraved silver plate on lid bearing name and arms of James Bovell. Contains from front to back: perforator, hook, crotchet, craniotomy forceps, decapitator, common handle (for use with the hook, crotchet, vectis), short delivery forceps, longer forceps with shank ring, long forceps. The delivery forceps are straight with a cephalic but not a pelvic curve. Handles are cross-hatched ivory. Three empty compartments probably for a knife, curved needles, and reel of suturing material.

Case Size: H 85mm x W 395mm x D 272mm

Photo credit: Brian Boyle
This fine set was acquired quite unceremoniously by the Museum of the History of Medicine in October 1989. As often happens with artifacts, it was brought to the Museum by its owner, who generously wondered if it was of any use for the collection. A quick glance revealed that it was a most superior set of instruments, ivory handled ones being considerably rarer than their ebony counterparts, almost complete and in good condition, and that James Bovell’s nameplate was on the lid. The set has been owned by two successive Professors of Obstetrics at the University of Toronto.

Its original owner was James Bovell (1817-80), an important figure in Toronto medicine from 1850-70. He is probably best remembered for his influence on Sir William Osler and his 1854 paper written with Edward Hodder “On the Transfusion of Milk in Cholera.” Born in Barbados, Bovell trained in Britain from ca. 1833-38 and it is probable that he bought the obstetrical set there. Since he was described in his obituary in the Canada Lancet as “possessed of ample means,” the purchase of such an elaborate set would have presented no difficulty and was certainly appropriate for a man who became physician and clinical instructor at the Burnside Lying-In Hospital in Toronto.

The instruments are an addition to existing Bovell instrumentation in the Museum: his stethoscope, hand balance, and microscope slide case. But of equal importance, the set is a significant addition to the Museum’s obstetrical collection of instruments, furniture, textiles, amulets, and prints. Such a complete set for operative obstetrics is a poignant reminder of the state of the art before the introduction of the “new” caesarian section in the 1880s. For only then did the procedure become reasonably safe for the mother and child with the use of antiseptic measures, anaesthesia, and vastly improved operating technique, with the result that the destructive instruments needed to extract a dead foetus to save the living mother became obsolete in the Western world.

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