

Bill W. and the Belladonna Treatment

by Gary N.

For quite a number of years, I would read "Bill's Story" from the Big Book and read page 7 without a second thought. Not any more!

"Under the so-called Belladonna Treatment my brain cleared" is written on page 7 by Bill describing his treatment at Towns Hospital. What was the Belladonna Treatment?

The Belladonna Treatment was *developed* by Charles Towns a little after the beginning of the 20th Century as a treatment for addiction and alcoholism and by 1910 had become known as the Towns-Lambert treatment, as a Dr. Alexander Lambert, previously a physician to President Teddy Roosevelt, joined Charles Towns at Towns Hospital in New York City. The main ingredient was the deliriant atropa belladonna, also called deadly nightshade. Additional "deliriant" (chemicals used to cause delirium) were used as well.

Dr. Lambert described the belladonna treatment as follows in a 1912 article "Care and Control of the Alcoholic:"

"Briefly stated, it consist in the hourly dosage of a mixture of belladonna, hyoscyamus [also a deliriant], and xanthoxylum. The mixture is given *every* hour, day and night, for about fifty hours. There is also given about *every twelve* hours a vigorous catharsis of C.c. pills and blue mass [used to help with bowel elimination]. At the end of the treatment, when it is *evident* that there are abundant bilious stools, castor oil is given to clean out thoroughly the intestinal tract. If you *leave* any of the ingredients out, the reaction of the cessation of desire is not as clear cut as when the three are mixed together. The amount necessary to give is judged by the physiologic action of the belladonna it contains. When the face becomes flushed, the throat dry, and the pupils of the eyes dilated, you must cut down your mixture or cease giving it altogether until these symptoms pass. You must, *however*, push the mixture until these symptoms appear, or you will not obtain a clear cut cessation of the desire".

Some *have* referred to the belladonna treatment as a "puke and purge" treatment.

Depending upon the patient, a *variety* of additional interventions might be attempted. Chloral hydrate might be used initially to put the patient to sleep if he was still feeling the effects of his spree. Paraldehyde might be used. If the person was violent or thrashing, strychnine might be injected. Finally, older alcoholics and those in a weakened condition would *have* with milk one or two ounces of whiskey up to four times a day, Bill W. wrote that "hydrotherapy and mild exercise helped much."

A complete treatment for an alcoholic would last no longer than 8 days.