

Correspondence

Osiander's cervical amputation

To the Editors:

Being interested in the medical history of our specialty, I read with pleasure Dr. Milton L. McCall's historical outline of the origins of vaginal hysterectomy in his essay on "The Radical Vaginal Operative Approach in the Treatment of Carcinoma of the Cervix" in the October, 1959, issue. I also was interested in the bibliography provided and could not help but wonder about reference 23, supposedly the source for the claim that Osiander amputated a cancerous cervix in 1801. The name Osiander is still mentioned today in some European medical schools in connection with his description of one of the early signs of pregnancy.

The above-mentioned reference 23 quotes a ponderous title which, translated, reads: "Detailed Treatise on the Cowpox, Its Causes, Incidence, Vaccination, Treatment, Relations to other Skin Eruptions (Hautausschlägen, not Haulaus-schlägen), in Man and Animal, etc. . . ." Since I am unable to obtain this promising paper hereabouts, I would like to ask Dr. McCall in what connection and under which subheading of this treatise Osiander managed to discuss cervical amputation.

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Reply by Dr. McCall

To the Editors:

I appreciate the opportunity to answer Dr. Leopold Dickstein's letter.

F. B. Osiander (1759-1822) was Professor of Midwifery at Göttingen and was a prolific contributor to the obstetrical and gynecological literature of his day. In the preparation of the manuscript mentioned, I looked up a number of his writings. It is now apparent that an incorrect reference was used inadvertently, and I am grateful to Dr. Dickstein for pointing out this error so that it may be corrected.

Reference 23 was published in 1801, the very

year Professor Osiander performed the first amputation of the uterine cervix for cancer. However, it was not until 1808 that his report of this operation appeared in the *Göttingische gelehrte Anzeigen*. This article was translated by John Thomson, M.D. ("Observations on the Care of Cancer of the Womb by Excision," *Edinburgh M. & S. J.* 12: 286-294, 1816).

It is a historic fact that Professor Osiander had, for a period of 15 years, proposed that cancer of the cervix might be extirpated in suitable cases. The translation, in part, reads as follows:

"Professor Osiander, however, found performance of this operation to be very different from what he had conceived, when at last on the fifth of May, 1801, an opportunity presented itself to perform it. The patient was a widow whose situation was indeed as deplorable as could be imagined. The vagina was distended by a carcinomatous fungus of the orifice of the womb, as large as a child's head. It was extremely fetid and bled very violently. The fungus was seized and brought low down in the vagina by means of Smellie's forceps; but, in endeavoring to put a loop around the neck of the womb, the fungus broke off and the bleeding was terrible. . . . The part was cut off, preserved in spirits of wine, and was exhibited to the Royal Society. The bleeding for an instant was violent, but was very soon stopt by a sponge soaked in equal parts of alum, gum arabic and colophony applied in the vagina. The cure of this first operation went on so rapidly . . . that the patient could leave her bed in the third week and in the fourth walked about totally recovered."

The article goes on to state that by 1808 Professor Osiander had performed this operation 9 times with similar success. Because of Dr. Dickstein's interest in this phase of gynecological history, I have sent him a copy of Thomson's translation of Osiander's original article.

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