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Venom for Pain

His twisted features toneless as grey clay, a middle-aged Brooklyn man last week doubled up with such pain in his abdomen that his tousled head banged his knees. For a multitude of similar sufferers from cancer of abdominal organs the only anodyne is morphine.

The pain-contorted Brooklyn man was a patient of Anesthetist Marius Bohdan Greene. Taking him into an aseptic operating room, he gently rolled the patient on his side, rolled up the bed shirt, injected into the spine a mixture of alcohol chloroform, acetone and cobra venom. The tortured man unbent. Faint color flooded his face. He opened his eyes.

And Dr. Greene hastened away to catch a train for Ottawa, where he was scheduled to tell the American Association for the Advancement of Science (see p. 20) about his new pain interceptor.

According to his theory, injury to any part of the body also injures local nerves and sends messages of pain to the brain to protect the injured part. The brain sends messages down the spinal cord to nerves of the muscles at the site of injury. A hurt fist will clench, a face twist, a foot limp. These messages may accumulate if the injury is very great or persistent. This accumulation of nerve impulses may itself irritate nerves, causing useless and damaging excess pain.

The venom (Dr. Greene also uses extracts from bees, lizards and salamanders) in combination with the other ingredients of his spinal injection interrupts the nervous circulation of pain. This it does by paralyzing efferent motor nerves (which carry commands from the brain) just where they branch from the spinal cord. For lack of orders from the brain to do something, the injured part relaxes, does nothing. This gives injured local nerves opportunity to heal and to help the injured muscles

which they serve, to heal also. Dr. Greene finds his anodyne an aid in the treatment of back injuries, sciatica and shaking palsy. In cases of inoperable cancer the patient has opportunity to die in peace.

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