
In 1777 Monsieur Sigault (b. 1740), a French surgeon, carried out with the assistance of Alfonse Vincent Louis Antonie Le Roy (1742–1816) an operation that he had first suggested in 1768 as an alternative to Caesarian section in those midwifery cases in which narrowness or deformity of the pelvis prevented normal delivery. Caesarian section, while it might save the child, almost invariably led to the death of the mother. Sigault thought that by cutting through the connection between the ossa pubis, the inter pelvis space would be increased, allowing the delivery of the child and preserving the life of the mother. On the whole he received little support for his suggestion. The operation in itself was thought very dangerous and doubts were expressed as to whether the symphysis between the two pelvic bones would become re-established. News of the suggestion was sent to Petrus Camper who viewed it favourably and, to test the healing capacity of the symphysis, had the operation performed on a sow who was up and walking eight days afterwards.

In spite of discouragement, Segault carried out the operation when a suitable case came to him. Both the child and the mother lived, but the mother only just. Her recovery was marked by a series of relapses which brought her close to death, and her bladder, which had been wounded in the operation, remained permanently damaged. The Faculty of Medicine in Paris nevertheless considered the operation a very great success and promoted its use widely and enthusiastically. Sigault was awarded a medal and a Royal pension.

In 1777, James Vaughan, MD (Edinburgh) and physician at the Leicester Infirmary had a patient with a pelvis so badly deformed by *mollities ossum* that there was absolutely no hope of delivering the child. A Caesarian section was decided upon and a living child was extracted, but the mother survived the operation for only four days. Vaughan published an account of the case,¹ and having heard of the enthusiasm with which Segault's operation had been greeted in Paris, concluded by wondering if he should have tried it rather than the Caesarian section for his unhappy patient. Knowing of William's interest in such cases, he sent the pelvis to him for his museum.

1. James Vaughan, *Cases and Observations on the Hydrophobia to Which Is Annexed an Account of the Caesarian Section, with Reflections on Dividing the Symphysis of the Ossa Pubic*, 2nd edn (London, 1778).

389. To James Vaughan, 10 September 1778

Dear Sir

When you were pleased to send me the *pelvis* of your unhappy patient, you were desirous that it might be made as useful as possible. I look upon everything

of that kind which is given to me, as a present to the public; and consider myself as thereby called upon to serve the public with more diligence. To fulfil that duty, I have exhibited the *pelvis* at my lectures, with many others of similar conformation, both to explain that species of *mollities ossium*, and to illustrate some observations which I made upon a subject of a very interesting nature, viz. the operation newly introduced into practice, of cutting the *Symphysis* of the *Ossa Pubis*. Some time after my course of lectures was finished, it happened to be my turn, in rotation, at a quarterly meeting of physicians,¹ to read a paper upon some medical subject. I chose that operation for my subject, because I thought at this time it might be particularly seasonable: and for the same reason I send it to you, you may publish it in the second edition of your book, which you inform me is soon to be put to the press.²

Since the paper was drawn up, I have read Mr *Le Roy's* pamphlet,³ which he was pleased to send me lately. This gave rise to a few additional reflections, which I have thrown into two notes.

I am etc. etc. etc.

William Hunter

Sept. 10th 1778

Vaughan, *Cases and Observations on the Hydrophobia*. A draft of this letter is in the Hunter Papers, H. 170.

1. The Society of Collegiate Physicians that had quarterly meetings at which members read papers.
2. Vaughan, *Cases and Observations on the Hydrophobia*.
3. Alfonse Vincent Louis Antonie Le Roy, *Recherches historique et pratiques sur la section de la symphyse du pubis pratiquées pour suppléer à l'opération césarienne, le 2 October 1777 sur la femme Souchot* (Paris, 1778). A copy is in the Hunterian Library.

It is clear from William's paper, published by Vaughan, that he was very doubtful about the operation, but

To raise a popular cry against this practice, before it is well understood would be unfair; and would be shewing an unbecoming disrespect to the ingenuity and no doubt the humane intentions of Messes Sigault, Camper and le Roy, the authors of this operation. We would only wish that we may advance with great caution, receive light as it comes upon us with experience; and finally, approve or reject upon solid ground, and at as little expense to human nature as possible.

William undertook a thorough anatomical investigation of the nature of the symphysis, and the results of dividing it. From his experiments he showed that by cutting it the bones only separated half an inch. They could be forced apart two and a half inches, but only by tearing the ligaments at the sides of the sacrum. He

concluded that ‘the mischief that may result from cutting the joint and tearing the two bones assunder can be ascertained by experience only’. He thought that, where delivery could not be achieved but the mother was not in danger, it was safer to remove the child with a crochet than to resort to the risks of an operation and the resultant ‘damage to the strongest joints of the body’. In those cases where both mother and child would be lost without performing the Caesarian operation, cutting the symphysis instead would by no means necessarily result in a delivery. Since he possessed the pelvises of the two Caesarian cases with which he had been connected in London, as well as that from Vaughan’s case, he had Frederick Birnie make drawings showing that in none of the cases would separating the pelvic bones by two and a half inches have provided enough space within the pelvis to have allowed delivery.¹ These drawings were published in Vaughan’s work.

In 1783 William Osborn gave a full account of this operation, which had continued to be very popular on the continent, but was not favoured in Britain as a result of William’s investigation. Osborn concluded his account:

The women of Great Britain are therefore under considerable obligation to Dr. Hunter, who from an accurate mensuration of those pelvisis wherein the Caesarian operation had actually been performed in this country and of others still smaller preserved in his museum has demonstrated the futility of the section of the symphysis as a succedaneum for that operation or as a certain means of preserving both mother and child. He has with great good sense and professional knowledge, and above all, with an earnestness for the interests of humanity, which has invariably marked his character throughout life, endeavoured to counteract the intemperate praise of the College of Physicians at Paris and prevent its influence in this country.²

It is often said that William refused to use forceps. In his appendix to Vaughan’s publication, he considered the various ways of dealing with difficult births and added this comment on his use of forceps:

I have sometimes used it to great advantage and, I believe, never materially hurt a mother or child with it, because I always used it with fear and circumspection yet I am clearly of opinion, from all the information which I have been able to procure, that the Forceps (midwifery instruments in general, I fear) upon the whole have done more harm than good.³

1. Hunter Figures, HF. 108.

2. William Osborn, *An Essay on Laborious Parturition* (London, 1783).

3. Vaughan, *Cases and Observations on Hydrophobia*.