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A Tribute to Manuel Garcia

By Clyde W. Jones, M.D., F.A.C.A.

As anesthesiologists, our practice is intimately associated with the larynx in general and with the vocal cords in particular. No one will disagree with the fact that the laryngoscope is the pivotal instrument in our collection. We are required to have intimate knowledge of the anatomy and physiology of the larynx. I reflect on two items that did much to beautifully augment my knowledge in this area. One was a magnificent illustration of the anatomy of the larynx in a Ciba Symposium by the celebrated artist and illustrator, Frank Netter, M.D., and a brilliant chalk board illustration on the subject by Leroy Vandam, M.D. His expertise as an artist imparted a three-dimensional appreciation for the structure that is rarely presented.

It must be remembered that, despite the fact that the vocal cords may enable their possessors to be great orators and fantastic singers, these functions are

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secondary. Their primary function is sphincteric—to protect the airway. Sometimes this function is performed with such ferocity that anesthesiologists are rendered supremely anxious and achieve premature graying of their locks.

I have had occasion, in my career, to anesthetize opera singers, as many anesthesiologists have. They all know about endotracheal intubation and issue injunctions relative to the care and preservation of their precious instruments. This is a serious matter since a granuloma or even a piece of tenacious phlegm can greatly impair or alter the performance of these finely tuned structures.

It is fitting that the first knowledge obtained of the function of the vocal cords in action was elucidated, not by anatomists or physiologists, but by a voice teacher, Manuel Garcia. Prior to his work our knowledge was confined to cadaveric dissection.

Manuel Garcia was a Spaniard from Madrid. As a voice teacher he was curious as to what the vocal cords looked like in action and took it upon himself to satisfy his curiosity. He purchased a dental mirror in France for six francs and, using it with an ingenious arrangement of mirrors, he observed his own vocal cords and those of his students as they sang. He was the first known person to observe and describe such laryngeal dynamics. Because of his astute work in scientifically investigating the function of the larynx, unknown at the time, he has been dubbed by some “the father of laryngology.” Manuel Garcia was born in 1805 and died in 1906.

Laughing Gas

Two hydrogen atoms walk into a bar. One says, “I’ve lost my electron.” The other says, “Are you sure?” The first replies, “Yes, I’m positive ...”

Two cannibals are eating a clown. One says to the other, “Does this taste funny to you?”

What do you call a fish with no eyes? A fish.