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ANESTHESIOLOGY REFLECTIONS FROM THE WOOD LIBRARY-MUSEUM

Vapo-Cresolene: A Dangerous Beauty Redeemed



At the turn of the twentieth century, the attractive kerosene-fueled vaporizer lamp and *cresol* solution known together as Vapo-Cresolene (*center*) caught the public's eye and became famously profitable by capitalizing on fears sparked by the germ theory. British surgeon Joseph Lister had sprayed carbolic acid on his patients and himself to reduce the risk of infection. Since cresol, like carbolic acid, was also a byproduct of coal tar distillation, it was assumed to have similar antiseptic properties. Thus, cresolene was disingenuously marketed as an air purifier and a respiratory cure (*left and right*). Recognizing the perils of this phenol-derived puff of smoke, the American Medical Association published a 1908 report exposing Vapo-Cresolene's propensity to cause respiratory distress, muscle weakness, and coma. The Food and Drug Administration similarly cautioned the public in its traveling "Chamber of Horrors" exhibit in 1933. Not tempted to administer Vapo-Cresolene's vapors to their patients, many anesthesiologists repurposed the alluring kerosene lamp and tin tray to sterilize local anesthetic solutions before spinal injection. (Copyright © the American Society of Anesthesiologists' Wood Library-Museum of Anesthesiology.)

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