

Treatment of men was unspeakably cruel, painful

by [Luther Granquist](#) // June 10th, 2010

Editor's note: The topic of this month's History Note, while important in the context of past treatment of people with disabilities in state institutions, may be offensive to some readers.



Dr. Samuel Shantz, the first superintendent of Minnesota's Hospital for the Insane at St. Peter, thanked God in his report to the Board of Trustees in 1867 for permitting them "to inaugurate this great charity." The Board itself reported to the Governor that the hospital would "stand as the noblest evidence of an advancing Christian civilization."

For some persons who went there, this new institution was indeed an asylum, a place of refuge. For others, however, the treatment Shantz and his successors provided was cruel indeed.



Shantz believed that masturbation caused insanity. He called it a "vicious habit" in notes he recorded in 1867 and 1868. Other physicians of that era agreed. One even wrote that the habit of masturbation was "the destroying element of civilized society."

Within the confines of the asylum, Shantz and the physicians who followed him adopted methods to treat or to prevent masturbation that do not reflect a civilized society. Blistering was one. Dr. James Bowers made this

entry on March 1, 1870 in the hospital record for a man from Wright County: “No treatment is adopted except keeping him blistered which seems the only means to keep him quiet.” A 16-year-old boy from Waba-sha County “was caught masturbating for which he was blistered.” The physician ordered the staff to “keep him sore.” Those records do not specify what was used to cause blistering, but medical texts of that era mention applying a vinegar-like substance called *acetum lyttae* under the foreskin or using a hot iron. Some doctors questioned the effectiveness of these methods because “the itching which follows them tends to aggravate the evil.”

St. Peter records from 1884 show that the physicians there also used another method. In June 1884, a St. Peter physician “wired” the foreskin of an 18-year-old for masturbating. Earlier that year the same physician made this note in the record of a man from Minneapolis: “Known to masturbate. Put in a wire today much to his chagrin.”

A young man transferred to St. Peter from the new School for the Feebleminded at Faribault “had a ring inserted” because he masturbated. The St. Peter records do not describe how these men were wired, but an 1879 *Manual of Psychological Medicine* describes the “ingenious” plan of a Dr. Yellowlees of the Glasgow Royal Asylum who “rings the prepuce with silver wire, as the snouts of swine are wired to prevent their routing.”

The 1879 *Manual* suggested that providing these men a lot of exercise to tire them out could also be an effective strategy, yet both the text writers and the St. Peter staff approved of intentional infliction of pain by blistering and wiring men and boys they frequently termed “disgusting.” That term more aptly describes the treatment they administered