

The Chevalier Dubois de Chemant (1753–1833) and a failure to recover fees owed

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Problems with getting patients to pay for work done are not new. In February 1826 the dentist, Nicolas Dubois de Chemant took Lord Egerton, the Earl of Bridgewater to court in Paris for failing to pay him what he felt was his due. Unfortunately, de Chemant had not invoiced him or given him a fee scale, but instead relied on the Earl's generosity matching up with what he felt his services were worth. The following report is taken from an English newspaper, *The News* published on 19 February 1826 (Fig. 1).¹ Lord Egerton played the court to a tee...

'The Court having ordered the parties to appear before them in person, Lord Egerton was led [in] supported upon the arms of two stout men. He seemed to be in a state of great suffering, and was accommodated with a chair. On the President asking M. Dubois de Chemant on what grounds he claimed 15,000 francs (625L) from the noble foreigner? The dentist replied – Mr. President, it is I, who during fifteen, nay eighteen months, have watched over (*ai veille*) the mouth of Monseigneur. I have furnished him with one, two, three, four, five, six, and seven *ratebers* (sets of teeth), and have, moreover, paid him a hundred visits. Now, for all that I have received as yet but five thousand francs, and I think there is nothing immoderate in demanding fifteen thousand francs more.'

He goes on to say that Lord Egerton engaged him to leave England and follow him to France as he was 'a man necessary to his jaws' and 'in order to give him all the attention he required... I abandoned every thing.'

The President of the tribunal asks him how much he charges for each set of teeth and each visit to which he replies, 'There is no fixed price, it is according to the fortune of the patient. His Lordship has no reason to complain, for all the members of his family, who confided their mouth to me, have paid me as high a price as that which I ask from him.' On again being asked, 'Did you not agree upon a fixed price?' Dubois responds, 'No, Sir, I trusted to the generosity of Monseigneur.' Already showing which way his sympathies lie the President comments, 'Yes, you trusted to his generosity, in case it should surpass your hopes!' and asks Lord Egerton to 'explain the facts.'

Due to a 'paralytic affection' the Earl can only whisper to his private secretary who then speaks for him. The proceedings continue with his reply: 'This pretended dentist having been brought by his own affairs into France, came and offered his services to my Lord, whose *jaw* he knew by reputation... He furnished him with three sets of teeth, and not seven, as he pretends. Moreover, these sets of teeth were so bad (his Lordship corroborated this assertion, by frequently nodding his head) that Lord Egerton never made use of them. – He thought he paid sufficiently dear, in giving 100l. sterling a piece for them, and besides he offered a sum of 2,507 francs, to avoid litigating the affair.'

The counsel for M. Dubois de Chemant then rose to describe the pre-eminence of his client as the inventor of mineral (porcelain)

teeth. In fact, porcelain teeth were invented by an apothecary, Alexis Duchâteaux (1714 to 1792) but de Chemant refined, experimented and worked on the recipe until his mineral paste teeth were perfected, practical and long-lasting with a special spring attachment (Fig. 2) so that they could, apparently, even be used when eating. On being presented with these ultimate dentures in 1789, the Académie des Sciences interviewed a selection of the dentist's noble patients, reporting back positively on its findings. Following this and similar reports by the Faculty of Medicine and the Faculty of Physic of Paris he received a royal patent from King Louis XVI. However, a litigious episode led to him settling more or less permanently in England



Fig. 1 *The News* (London), 19 February 1826. Courtesy of the BDA Museum

◀ in 1792, receiving a 14-year patent as the exclusive manufacturer of ‘mineral paste teeth.’ Nevertheless, as this court case indicates he seems to have returned to Paris around 1825 where he practised at 7 Rue Vivienne.^{2,3,4}

The News resumes with de Chemant’s counsel: ‘To give you an idea of the importance that his Lordship attached to the skill and attention of the dentist, it will suffice to tell you that he promised to indemnify him for a loss of 200,000 francs, which the failure of the famous banker *Fauntleroy* had caused him. M. de Chemant... is well known for the perfection of his mineral teeth.’ (No, no, cried Lord Egerton, shaking his head.) ‘But, gentlemen, I shall tell you what troubled the harmony that had reigned so long between his Lordship and my client. One day M. de Chemant coming to visit Lord Egerton, said ‘Monseigneur, I am in very bad spirits to-day, for my son has been attacked with a *fièvre rouge*. At these words his Lordship rose from his easy chair and cried out with all his force, “help! help!” His domestics, to the number of *forty*, rushed in and hurried him into a distant apartment. This was not all; for his Lordship, in order to purify his servants, who had been polluted by

the sight of the father of a sick child, ordered them to tear off their clothes, as if they had been infected with the plague. This was the cause of the rupture.’

After deliberating the judgment was that ‘as Lord Egerton formally denies having received a hundred visits, and only acknowledges those necessary for fitting in the sets of teeth, the tribunal declares that the 2,507f. 50c. paid into Court, is a sufficient answer to the action, and

‘de Chemant refined, experimented and worked on the recipe until his mineral paste teeth were perfected, practical and long-lasting’

orders M. de Chemant to give a receipt in full for the sum of 2,507f. 50c. which is a large and generous remuneration.’

M. de Chemant did not give up the fight so easily. On 11 August 1826, the *Morning Post* reported on the results of an appeal that he had lodged with the Cour Royale.⁵ The results were not favourable. Statements made by his counsel were said to be ‘totally void of proof, and must have appeared to every one present... to be without foundation, in fact, in law, or in common sense.’ Unfortunately, the enraged dentist had spent the time between February and August penning a *memoire*⁶ which he had had ‘the ill-judged audacity to distribute in the coffee-houses, reading-rooms and other public places – a libel, casting the most injurious and unjustifiable reflections on the character and conduct of his Lordship... with a view of intimidating his Lordship into a compliance with [his] exorbitant demands.’ Lord Egerton demanded not only the suppression of this defamatory text but damages which he said would be paid to Charity. The Court declared that ‘in addition to the disgracefulness of a professional man’s exposing, with irony and ridicule, the infirmities which he was called in to relieve, Dubois de Chemant has heaped up calumnious imputations on the morals of the defendant.’ The judgment was that the *memoire* be suppressed and that M. de Chemant should pay damages of 1,000 francs plus all costs.⁵

Possibly as a result of this case the pioneering prosthetic dentist returned to England in 1827,⁷ handing over his London practice to his son, Adolphus Dubois two years later.⁸ In 1833, a brief unremarkable notice in the papers reported his death, ‘On the morning of the 25th of October, in the 81st year of his age, Mr Nicholas Dubois De Chemant, Esq. at his house, 2, Frith Street, Soho square.’⁹ ■

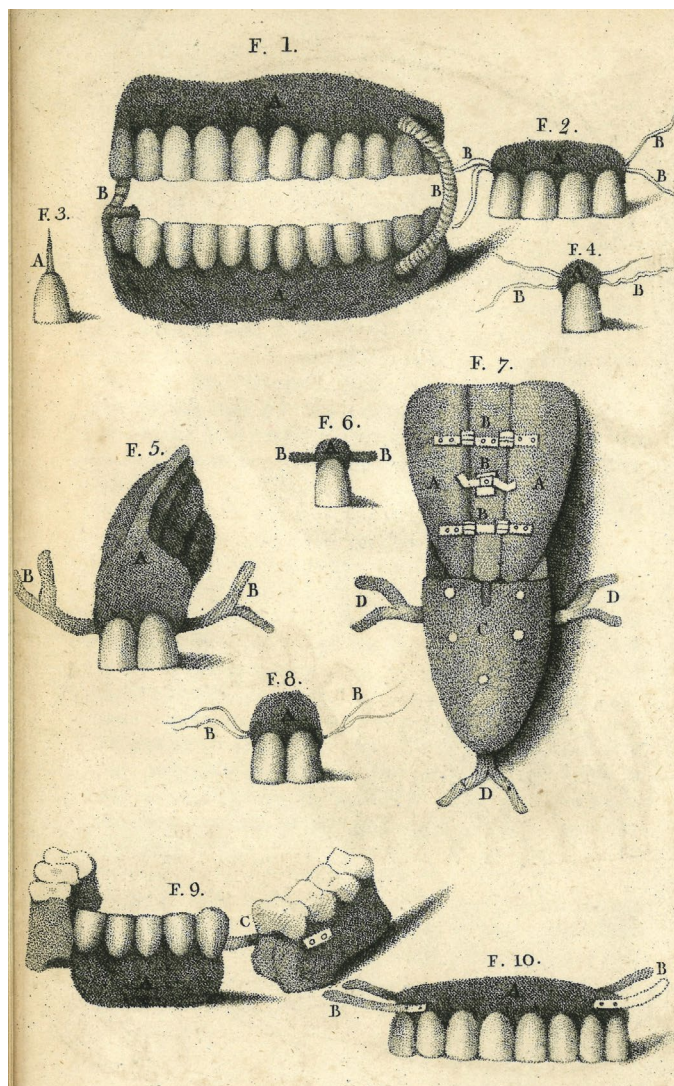


Fig. 2 Plate showing de Chemant’s mineral paste teeth from *A Dissertation on Artificial Teeth. Evincing the Advantages of Teeth Made of Mineral Paste, Over Every Denomination of Animal Substance*. J. Barker, 1797. Courtesy of the BDA Library

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