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Tonsils and tobacco – the story of the president Ulysses Grant

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Background: A colorful and sometimes controversial figure, the story of President Ulysses Grant and his battle with tonsillar cancer provides an illuminating lens by which to examine advancements in oropharyngeal cancer management and changing societal attitudes towards tobacco. A heavy tobacco and alcohol consumer, Ulysses Grant first rose to prominence as a General in the Union Army during the American Civil War, with his victory at the Battle of Fort Donaldson earning him 10,000 cigars. Subsequently he ran for office in 1869 with a campaign song “A Smokin’ His Cigar” propelling his campaign. Seven years after his time as President, Grant first complained of odynophagia and was later diagnosed with “serious epithelial trouble” of his right tonsillar fossa which we today call squamous cell carcinoma (SCC). Contrary to modern day thinking, he was treated conservatively with topical iodoform, carbolic acid gargles, and topical cocaine. He subsequently succumbed to his cancer in 1885, a year after being diagnosed.

Aims and Methods: Through review of historical literature

and Ulysses Grant’s own personal accounts of his battle with oropharyngeal cancer, this paper aims to contrast 19th and 21st century approaches to the management of oropharyngeal cancer to highlight advancements in practice. Furthermore, we aim to demonstrate the evolution of socio-cultural perceptions of tobacco by contrasting the positive impact of tobacco on Grant’s Presidential campaign with current attitudes towards tobacco.

Conclusion: The story of a prominent figure such as Ulysses Grant provides a time point in history that captures social and surgical attitudes towards tobacco and oropharyngeal cancer that, when contrasted with our current perceptions, illuminate the evolution of our specialty.

Biography

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