Joseph Dietl (1804–1878). Innovator of medicine and his credit for urology

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KEY WORDS

history of urology and medicine » Joseph Dietl » bloodletting » "Dietl’s crisis" » balneology

ABSTRACT

The year 1878 marks the death of Joseph Dietl, an outstanding European physician of the 19th century. His uncommon ability, industry, inexhaustible energy, dogged perseverance, and courage contributed to the development of medical science in Europe. He also contributed to reform of the educational system, and to bringing order to the badly neglected city of Cracow. He belonged to the so called New Vienna School of Medicine.

Dietl, chief physician at the Wieden Hospital in Vienna since 1941, had voiced his disbelief in the existing therapy in such strong terms that it was recorded in the history of medicine as the program of therapeutic nihilism. He demonstrated experimentally in Vienna and Cracow that bloodletting in pneumonia is not indicated, since it does not promote recovery and is indeed harmful, raising mortality rates three times compared to those patients who had received a dietary treatment only. He eliminated bloodletting in pneumonia therapy.

Dietl was the first to investigate and classify Galician and Silesian therapeutic springs as well as work out detailed prescriptions for spa treatments. He understood that treatment in a health resort could not be limited to balneotherapy, and he indicated that climatotherapy and physiotherapy should also play a role. Dietl described the crisis attributable to a kink in the renal vessels or ureter when the kidney dropped. It was also Dietl who gave a description of the floating kidney problem and of partial kidney incarceration, a condition still known as "Dietl’s crisis".

INTRODUCTION

A hundred thirty-two years ago, on the 18th of January, 1878, an outstanding European physician of the 19th century died (Fig. 1). Joseph Dietl's name is known for urology as a "Dietl’s crisis". In 1864, he described the sudden severe attacks of pain, nausea, and vomiting, and followed, at times, by polyuria, ascribing them to partial turning of the floating kidney upon its pedicle. Although Dietl’s name is frequently mentioned in handbooks of the history of medicine, the discussion of Dietl in these books is limited to non-medical readers. In brief, Dietl indicated that society criticized physicians because their attempted treatments often produced no results. Dietl explained that recovery from illness depended largely on the forces of nature and the role of the physician was not to

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- With the clinical study „bloodletting in pneumonia”;
- With the investigation and classification of Galician and Silesian therapeutic springs, and
- With the reform of the Jagiellonian University and city of Cracow.

The purpose of this paper is to briefly present this famous Polish/Austrian physician with the broad scope of his activities that succeeded revolutionary achievements especially in internal medicine and balneology.

Biographical details

Joseph Dietl was born on January 24, 1804, in Podbuże in the Sambor district (formerly Galicia*). His father Franciscus, of German extraction, was a minor provincial official and his mother, Anna Kulczycka, came from impoverished Polish nobility.

His education began in a primary school in Sambor and, after the family had moved, continued first in Tarnów and then, from the year 1817, in Nowy Sącz (Neu-Sandez), where he completed his grammar school education. His father died in 1819, leaving young Joseph in dire financial straits without family support. Dietl was thus forced to continue his education by his own efforts, which he did by coaching other students for his keep and his further schooling.

In 1821, Dietl enrolled at the University of Lemberg/Lwów (now Lviv, in the Ukraine), where he completed a 3-year course in philosophy. His examination results were so outstanding that he attracted the attention of a professor of mathematics who allowed him to give lectures to philosophy students. He also acquired reasonable proficiency in French and Italian, and saved some money for planned studies in Vienna.

Dietl started his medical studies in Vienna in 1823. He felt out of place in Viennese social circles, but was full of admiration for the University. His money soon ran out, and he was left without any means of support. It was at this critical moment that Dietl had a stroke of good luck. He became a private tutor in the home of his employer’s sons, and it was in this way that he entered Viennese society. After two terms he received a grant from the Galician States, amounting to 400 zl† per year, which allowed him to devote more time to the study of medicine. At the end of six years, he passed his examinations with flying colors and defended his doctoral thesis in 1829, obtaining a Doctoral Diploma of Medicine [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6].

His medical doctoral thesis

The thesis was written in German, entitled “Some words about the credibility of health science especially worth remembering for non-physicians” [6].

Dietl’s thesis was unconventional in as much as the twenty-five year old medical graduate was addressing himself mainly to non-medical readers. In brief, Dietl indicated that society criticized physicians because their attempted treatments often produced no results. Dietl explained that recovery from illness depended largely on the forces of nature and the role of the physician was not to

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produce miracles, but rather to stimulate the natural forces of the body. The point of view presented by Dietl in his thesis was in agreement with the general opinion of the New Vienna School of Medicine (Carl von Rokitansky [1804–1878], Joseph Skoda [1805–1881], Joseph Dietl), as well as being progressive and rational in a time of primitive and frequently harmful therapeutic methods [1, 6-9].

Professional activity

Even before his doctoral thesis had been published, Dietl was offered and accepted the position of demonstrator in the Department of Natural and Specific History (Mineralogy and Zoology) at the University of Vienna, where his duties included coaching students and preparation and assistance in the lectures of Professor Johann Andreas Scherer (1756-1844), for whom he would very often stand-in.

In 1830, he was delegated by the government to help in the control of the cholera epidemics in Vienna. As a result of his success in 1830, the Austrian authorities made Dietl director of Vienna’s largest hospital for cholera patients during a new cholera epidemic in 1832. On completing this task he worked, until 1833, as a lecturer in the department of natural history. After failing to win a competition for appointment as head of department at the University of Padua, Dietl left the academic world and accepted the post of doctor to the Vienna police district, in Wieden, a suburb of Vienna. Owing to his productive work, a talent for organization, and extensive private practice, Dietl became a well-known and highly regarded physician in the Austrian capital [2-5, 7, 9-11].

His work in Wieden Hospital

In 1841, Dietl became an unpaid chief physician in the Department of Internal Medicine of a newly opened Wieden hospital in the outskirts of Vienna. In 1848, he became director of the entire hospital. These two positions at the new hospital gave Dietl the opportunity to realize his intention of developing his research activity. While he was in this post he embarked upon lively scientific prolificity.

In 1845, he published the article “Praktische Wahrnehmungen nach den Ergebnissen der vorjährigen Epidemie im Wiener Polizeibezirke Wieden” (Practical observations based on the results of the previous-year’s epidemic in Wieden). In this article he presented the major ideas of the pathologic and therapeutic points of view of the New Vienna School of Medicine. Dietl’s article has since become known as the “Manifesto of the Vienna School”. This new trend in medicine came from a group of physicians working at the University of Vienna (Skoda, Rokitanski, Dietl and Hebra, 1816–1880). While the old school carried on therapy before engaging in research, the new school began researching in order to be able to undertake therapy. The New Vienna School was trying to move medicine along the lines of rational and scientific study. These men, together with Dietl, outlined the major role that morbid anatomy must play in the true understanding of clinical problems. Dietl claimed that acquaintance with the human body, based on the natural sciences, had to be a pre-condition for clinical medicine. In his work “An anatomical analysis of brain disturbances” (Anatomische Klinik der Gehirnkrankeiten), Dietl described the role of pathologic anatomy in clinical research and then went on to call morbid anatomy the fundamental doctrine of medicine. The body of Dietl’s work was a comprehensive review of various changes in the brain, based on pathologic examinations compared with clinical manifestations. Dietl, in an oft-quoted utterance of 1851, announced that a physician must be judged, not by the success of his treatment but by the extent of his knowledge: “As long as medicine is art, it will not be science. As long as there are successful physicians there will be no scientific physicians”. These genius paradoxes, which amounted virtually to a plea of impotence, made up the “therapeutic nihilism” of the New Vienna School.

Starting in 1846, Dietl traveled extensively within Europe and beyond, funded by the Austrian government, with the aim of familiarizing himself with hospital organization and treatment methods. He visited nearly all renowned European hospitals, and his observations resulted in a series of valuable reports which he published in “Zeitschrift der kais. kör. Gesellschaft der Ärzte zu Wien” between 1850 and 1853.

He published reports about each hospital and each country and in 1853, drawing from his years of observations in his outstanding work “Kritische Darstellung europäischer Krankenhäuser” (Critical description of European hospitals), Dietl described his observations concerning the state of equipment and organization of the hospitals he had visited. This was the first significant German-language work in the field of hospital hygiene. To this day it is of major value to hospital hygiene and is highly regarded by specialists [1, 3, 7-10, 12-15].

The treatment of pneumonia

In Vienna in 1849, Dietl published a work entitled “Der Aderlass in den Lungenentzündungen. Klinisch und physiologisch erörtert” (Bloodletting in pneumonia from clinical and physiological stand points); it was translated into Polish, with supplemental investigations and their results, in 1852. This was the result of many years of investigations and clinical observations carried out by the author during his work in the then new suburban hospital in Vienna and in Cracow. Both of his books on lung infections soon became very popular and were widely read. This famous historic study reverberated through the world of medicine. Contrary to his predecessor Pierre C. A. Louis (1787–1872), who showed by statistical proof that bloodletting was of little value in pneumonia (“... Ansi, l’étude des symptôms généraux et locaux, la mortalité et les variations de la durée moyenne de la pneumonie, suivant l’époque à laquelle les émissions sanguines furent commences; tout depose des bonnes étroites de l’utilité de ce moyen de traitement, dans la pneumonie...”), Dietl argued energetically and passionately against blood letting in pneumonia, and generally against automatic resort to this age-old doctrinaire intervention. He demonstrated that bleeding in pneumonia is not indicated, since it does not promote recovery and is indeed harmful, raising mortality rates. According to the data presented for patients suffering from pneumonia, the mortality rate was 20.4 percent for those patients who had had bleeding performed on them, compared to a mortality rate of just 7.4 percent for those patients who had received only a dietary treatment. He eliminated bloodletting in pneumonia therapy.

The work precipitated a revolution in medical thinking, and Dietl’s name became widely known in Europe. His resolute stand against bloodletting, used uncritically in a variety of conditions since the time of Hippocrates, won Dietl many adherents and led to advancement of his scientific and academic career. In 1851, he thus became head of the Medical Department and Clinic in Cracow [4, 11, 16-19, 20-23].

Working in Cracow

On May 12, 1851, Dietl took over the Department of Pathology and Specific Therapy and the Medical Clinic in Cracow. The Internal Diseases Clinic, equipped modestly but in exemplary fashion, and having only 18 beds, came into new prominence when Dietl assumed its leadership. Gifted with exceptional pedagogical ability, high intelligence, and extensive knowledge and experience Dietl became the most eminent professor not only in the Department
of Medicine but also in the entire University. He quickly won over the hearts and minds of young students waiting impatiently for modern methods of treatment and admiring the sheer competence, self-confidence, and simplicity of his lectures. His pragmatic approach and sense of obligation to his patients did not allow Dietl to remain for long in the darkness of therapeutic nihilism.

He developed the clinical examination procedure and was the first in Cracow to hold special classes on percussion and auscultation, regarding these activities as fundamental in the physical examination of each patient. Soon, a pleximeter and stethoscope became essential parts of the doctor's accessory kit. It was here, in the course of 14 years of work, until 1865, that Dietl displayed his talents as organizer, modern clinician, educator, and scientist. He believed in "exact examination and simple treatment", and he adopted this principle as the basis of medical procedure. He taught that medicine is not art but science.

In the course of his 14 years in office, Dietl extended the Clinic's capacity by 6 beds, expanded the laboratory, and raised his department to a very high level. The latest scientific achievements were implemented there. Idolized by his students, he was held in very high regard by his patients, who trusted him without question [1, 3, 7, 10, 11, 16].

The battle against the plica polonica s. trichoma

Joseph Dietl is also associated with the eradication of a general belief in the benefits of the kolutn⁴, a Polish term for a mass of tangled hair, also known in Latin as plica polonica. In Dietl's time, in towns and villages throughout the country, one could see people with enormous sticky masses of matted hair hanging halfway down their back and sometimes to the waist, emitting a characteristic repulsive odor and generally crawling with vermin. This was the 'kolutn'.

There was a general superstitious belief in Poland that a kolutn would get rid of many chronic diseases, and that people who shaved it off were laying themselves open to the dangers of convulsions, paralysis, blindness, mental disturbances, and even death. This belief was in Dietl's time common among the uneducated masses, but was also unfortunately shared by some doctors, sometimes even doctors in eminent positions.

Professor Józef Frank (1771-1842) from Wilno (now Vilnus in Lithuania) regarded the kolutn as a variety of leprosy.⁵ His colleague Jędrzej Śniadecki (1768-1833) held that "plica is a genuine disease...about which no experienced and observant doctor in our country can have or in fact have any doubts." The renowned clinician Tytus Chalubiński (1820-1889) saw in plica a "certain pathological diathesis". The peak of the kolutn insanity was a treatise by cian Tytus Chalubiński (1820-1889) saw in plica a "certain patho-

Dietl was the first to declare war on this deep-rooted superstition, and he won despite fairly strong opposition. He denounced the plica in works such as "Observations on the plica" (1857) and "Plica. Report of a Commission Established by the Cracow Scientific Society to Investigate the Condition Known as Plica Disease" (1862), and involved the Cracow Scientific Society and the Austrian authority in this action. Summing up the results of the Commission's investigations and his own observations, Dietl showed that plica is not any kind of systemic disease, nor does it have any causal relationship with other pathological conditions, but is simply the outcome of total neglect of the hair. Dietl's energetic and resolute stand and his diplomatic approach to the problem of plica, based on the critical objectivity of an eminent clinician, much like his attitude to the bleeding of pneumonia patients, finally did society a service of inestimable value – eventual disappearance of plica and "plica as a disease" from the Polish landscape [1, 7, 10, 15, 21-25].

Involvement in Galician and Silesian balneology

Another side of Joseph Dietl's scientific and, at the same time, social endeavors was his work in Polish balneology. Having been educated in Vienna, Dietl always kept abreast with developments in western medicine, and at the time of his appointment to the department in Cracow, new forms of treatment were beginning to emerge in Western Europe. Working with ideas already popular in French and German medicine, he promoted the study and development of balneotherapy and climatherapy. In the years from 1854-1858, Dietl visited most European spas, paying special attention to different methods of balneotherapy. He then summarized and published his observations in his "Balneologische Reiseskizzen" (Balneological travel notes). Shortly thereafter, in 1857, Dietl visited ten Polish health resorts. He paid close attention to this sector of medical natural science, attempting to rescue Polish health resorts from their state of pitiful dilapidation and decline. Despite their rich and effective medicinal springs, Polish resorts were completely neglected because the inhabitants of Cracow and what was then called 'Little Poland', the southern and southeastern part of the country, preferred to travel to the much advertised foreign spas.

With his usual enthusiasm, Dietl embarked on a series of fact-finding visits to many Polish and foreign resorts. He was the first Polish balneologist to give a classification of Polish therapeutic springs as well as work out detailed prescriptions for spa treatment with a detailed assessment of their therapeutic value. His extensive work "Uwagi nad zdrojowiskami krajowymi ze względu na ich skuteczność, zastosowanie i urządzenie" (Comments on Polish health resorts concerning their effectiveness, use, and equipment), which appeared in 1858, made a valuable contribution to balneological literature. Beginning in 1855, Dietl published many papers on health resorts in Polish and in German, and did his best to make known Krynica, Iwonicz, Szczawnica, and Rabka and others center of Polish and Austrian balneology, both in Poland and abroad: "Galizische Badereisen" (Travels through spa in Galicia) in, Wiener Medizinische Wochenschrift, 1859-1860. A newly founded Balneological Commission, headed by Dietl in 1862, contributed to the expansion of the still very primitive facilities at the Polish health resorts, their modernization, and their adaptation to visitors' requirements. Among other things, it is to Dietl that Krynica owes its re-construction of mineral baths. Dietl recommended the waters of "Zdroj Główny" in Krynica inter alia to girls and married women suffering from anemia and chlorosis, and to patients with "chronic inflammation of the bladder and kidneys...and with skin eruptions". Therefore, Dietl is considered to be the father of balneology in Poland [7, 10, 15, 16, 20, 26, 27].
In 1864, on the basis of 3 years of experience at the Cracow Clinic, Dietl published a paper on the nephroptosis and observation of floating kidney incarceration (Fig. 2) – a pathological condition that may lead to urinary obstruction, renal colic, followed by hydronephrosis, and finally destruction of the kidney. The condition, which is still called “Dietl’s crisis”, is frequently accompanied by pulling and twisting of nerves, by turning of the kidney on its pedicle, and by renal blood flow disturbances that may provoke sudden severe attack of nephralgia, lumbal or gastric pain, chills, fever, tachycardia, cold sweats, nausea and vomiting, and even general collapse. In his floating kidney patients, Dietl favored conservative treatment, using abdominal supports with abdominal bandage, belt, corsets, or special trousers. Dietl’s crisis was diagnosed frequently. In cases of nephroptosis, if the pains were prolonged, he recommended placing the patient in the supine position and, by exerting gentle and gradually advancing pressure on the lower renal pole, sliding the kidney towards the lumbar region. The position of the kidney was then maintained it in its physiological position with the aid of mechanical, dietetic, and therapeutic measures. In difficult cases he recommended conservative, mechanical kidney support with abdominal bandage, belt or corset. Dietl theorized that the crisis occurred because of acute arterial kinking when the kidney dropped [1, 3, 7, 11, 15, 16, 25, 28].

Administrative and political activity at the Jagiellonian University

Dietl’s activity won general accolades. With his extensive knowledge, he worked unceasingly to raise the scientific level of the university of which he was a member. He served there as Professor (1851–1868), Dean (1856–1861), and Rector (1861–1862). He introduced the title and post of Assistant Professor of a Dozent within the academic structure. In 1862, the University authorities voted to extend Dietl’s term as Rector, but unfortunately this was vetoed by the Austrian State Department in Vienna. Despite this, Dietl remained a strong advocate of Polish nationalism and reform of the educational system. From his position in the Sejm (lower house of the Galician parliament) he spoke for an end to teaching school children in German, for an increase in the number of schools, and for improving the circumstances of teachers.

Appreciating the major role played by women in social life, he was a fervent proponent of sensible upbringing and comprehensive education for girls. This he proposed initially in his book on school reform and subsequently on becoming the city’s mayor, arguing for opening a “girls’ secondary school” in Cracow. Dietl proposed and supported to involve the peasant’s delegates in political life in Galicia.

Dietl even initiated that medical handbooks for students were translated into the Polish language and were printed at the University print shop. These books were then sold at very low prices for the students and so it became possible for the average student to possess textbooks and medical handbooks. This tireless patriotic and social activity was not much to the liking of the Austrian government, and on June 14, 1865, the Emperor Franz Joseph signed an order to retire Dietl prematurely from active employment, without giving any reasons. Dietl took this blow badly, never being able to come to terms with his removal from the University. He was then 61, and at the peak of his vital and creative powers [1, 2, 7, 11, 16, 20].

First mayor of the city of Cracow

A year later, in 1866, the Polish community finally saw the long-awaited advent of Galician autonomy, and the City Council of Cracow elected Dietl as the new mayor. His task was to restore the ancient capital, once the seat of Polish kings, to its proper status. The difficulties were immense. In a speech outlining his program,
Dietl said, “Our illustrious past is over, our present is dispiriting, but ours is the future if we grasp it, if we work for it unstintingly, with wisdom and with perseverance.”

Joseph Dietl’s 8 years as mayor of Cracow were distinguished by highly enterprising and successful activity bringing order to the neglected city in the sectors of hygiene, technical infrastructure and fire safety, municipal finances, schools, and protection of historical relics. He reorganized the City Council and worked on improving tradesmen’s conditions. He streamlined the city administration, increased its income and assets, and was instrumental in the development of schooling. He initiated the conservation of historical buildings and relics, among them the famous Cloth Halls. He was also involved in the organization of a fire brigade. During Dietl’s term in office, the Cracow Scientific Society was transformed into the Academy of Science (1873) and a number of societies for science and the arts were revived [1-4, 7, 11, 16, 17].

Activity between Cracow and Vienna

Dietl’s work extended far beyond the University. His scientific output ran to 138 published works and books. He also founded the periodical “Przegląd Lekarski” (Physicians Review), on which he worked as one of the editors.

He was the first elected mayor of the city of Cracow (1866), delegate to the Sejm of Galicia (1861), and delegate to the Austrian National Council (1861). One common thread ran through his activity in these positions and his public appearances a relentless, systematic, and uncompromising struggle for Polish autonomy and for bringing a national character to schools at all levels. It was a battle with the Austrian authorities for the spirit of Poland.

Having reformed the Cracow Clinic, he became a reformer of the University and subsequently of the entire public education system. He was a statesman who aimed to combine his country’s interests with those of the monarchy. Dietl not only raised the whole economy of Cracow to a new level, but also on the strength of his name and achievements, drew it to the attention of all and sundry abroad, including the highest authorities in the former capital, Vienna.

In 1869, Dietl organized and hosted the First Congress of Natural Scientists and Physicians in Cracow. In the same year, he prepared a magnificent reception for Emperor Franz Joseph which was a proof of the city’s sincere gratitude for restoring the Polish language to the Galician population in schools and in the civil service. The Emperor appreciated this gesture, and in return appointed Dietl a life member of the Austrian Upper House, a distinction seldom granted even to the governors of major cities in the monarchy. Here, too, Dietl did not fail to take advantage of his new position to strive for the aims carried deep in his heart. When, in 1871, the Karl Siegmund von Hohenwart (1824-1899) government began to totter, Dietl spoke in the Upper House with all the power of his eloquence in defence of the threatened federalism.

For his hospitable reception of the Papal Nuncio, Dietl received from Pope Pius IX the Order of St. Gregory. For his hospitable reception of the Papal Nuncio, Dietl received from Pope Pius IX the Order of St. Gregory. When he was mayor of Cracow, the Emperor decorated him with the order of the Iron Crown. He had already received the Order of Franz Joseph while he was a professor at the Medical Clinic in Cracow.

Notwithstanding his prodigious achievements, Dietl met with hostility from some envious members of the City Council, and when in time this opposition increasingly hindered his work he decided to step down. This was in June 1874. He also gave up his mandate to the City Council and retired completely to the peace and quiet of home life [1-5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 15, 16].

The closing years

In his private life, unfortunately, Dietl did not find happiness. Rheumatic complaints were becoming worse, and his physical strength was waning. From time to time, he would leave the city to go to his village of Rzuchowa near Tarnów, where his nephew Leopold Dietl continued to manage a farm, which Dietl had started.

He married late, after the age of forty. His wife, a young and attractive but poor Viennese girl, Helene Zieterbarth (1823-1885), did not speak Polish, felt lonely in Cracow, and did not understand her husband intellectually. The marriage was not a success and there were no children. After a few years of married life, feeling out of place in Cracow and troubled by nervous complaints, his wife left for Vienna and never came back.

Now in his seventies, Dietl was worn out and suffered from shortness of breath and rheumatic pains; apart from occasional visits from one or two relatives and a few friends, he was usually alone and he was approaching death. Despite the physical decline, his mental alertness was unimpaired to the last.

Józef Dietl died on January 18, 1878. His resplendent funeral was paid for by the city of Cracow, and the funeral procession was an immense patriotic demonstration by the city’s inhabitants. He is interred in the family tomb in the Rakowice cemetery in Cracow (Fig. 3). For services rendered during his time in office, one of the most beautiful streets in the city was named after Józef Dietl. His portrait with all the insignia of the Lord Mayor of Cracow was hung in the City Council’s meeting chamber.

Monuments and commemorative plates and medals are the means by which Cracow and other Polish cities including health resorts keep alive the memory of Joseph Dietl and his numerous accomplishments. These tributes are but a small reminder of how much is owed to this great man.

Fig. 3. Dietl’s family tomb at the Rakowice cemetery, Cracow.
He is remembered as a great doctor and educator, outstanding scientist, deservedly acclaimed political and social activist, relentless fighter for restoration of national character and education reform in Cracow and in Galicia. His life, works, his scientific and political activity are model examples of the cultural relationship between Middle – and Eastern Europe [1, 3-5, 7, 15, 16].

- The Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria, or simply Galicia, was the largest and northernmost province of Austria from 1772 until 1918, with Lemberg (Lviv, L'viv) as its capital city. It was created from the territories taken from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth during the partitions of Poland and lasted until the dissolution of Austria-Hungary at the end of the First World War. Today, Galicia is a historical region split between Poland and Ukraine

† zfr. (złoty renski) – the former German and Austro-Hungarian florin.

† koltun: Polish; German: Weichselzopf; English: Polish plait or plica; Greek: trichoma.

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