“The Uncertain Method of Drops”: How a Non-uniform Fluid Unit Survived the Century of Standardization

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This paper follows the journey of two small fluid units throughout the 19th century in Anglo-American medicine and pharmacy, explaining how the non-uniform “drop” survived while the standardized minim became obsolete. I emphasize two roles these units need to fulfill: that of a physical measuring device, and that of a rhetorical communication device. First, I discuss the challenges unique to measuring small amounts of fluid, outlining how the modern medicine dropper developed out of an effort to resolve problems with the “minimometer,” which measured minims. Second, I explain how drops, utilized in “the open drop method” of administering general anesthesia, effectively communicated a gradual process and epistemically valuable heuristic to the audience of practitioners, whose attention to individual medical outcomes was important for verifying the proper dosage.