

John Caius: early English physician, anatomist and epidemiologist

This year marks the birth, 500 years ago, of John Caius, a remarkable polymath. As a Greek scholar, physician, epidemiologist, anatomist, medical and academic administrator and generous benefactor, he was an interesting man! Caius was born in Lincoln in 1510. The family name was Keys, which he Latinised into a number of spellings, of which 'Caius' is the one in common use.

He entered Gonville Hall, Cambridge (founded in 1348), at the comparatively advanced age, in those days, of 18 years, initially to study humanities with a view to enter the church. However, a year later he changed to medicine, taking his degree in 1532. In 1539 he visited Padua, the most important medical school of the day. Here he studied under the anatomists Montana and Andreas Vesalius, sharing lodgings with the latter, the father of modern anatomy, who introduced the method of teaching by direct observation of human cadaver dissection.

After taking his MD in Padua in 1541, Caius showed his academic versatility by being appointed Professor of Greek at the university, but set off, a couple of years later, on an extensive tour of Italian and other European universities, especially to study the original manuscripts of Galen and Celsus in the great libraries of Florence, Pisa and the Vatican.

In 1547 Caius returned home to set up in practice in the precincts of St Bartholomew's Hospital (although he never worked at that historic institution). His house there remained his home throughout the rest of his life, even during his long absences. In the same year he was elected Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians. He built up a large, important (and lucrative) practice and was physician in turn to Edward VI, Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth.

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Caius had a long and distinguished association with the College of Physicians, being appointed President in 1555 and serving in this capacity nine times until 1571. He proved to be a shrewd administrator, gaining the College the right to dissect executed criminals and defeating a perfidious bid by the Company of Surgeons which would have allowed them to prescribe internal medicines for conditions such as sciatica and syphilis (then the prerogative of the physicians), rather than sticking to their proper tasks of tooth-drawing, blood-letting and dealing with ulcers and other superficial lesions. Caius presented the silver caduceus (sceptre) to the College which serves as the President's symbol of office to this day.

In 1551 there was an outbreak of 'the sweating sickness' in Shrewsbury. Caius went there to investigate and the following year published 'A Boke or Counsell against the Sweate or Sweatyng Sicknesse', the first medical text to be published in the English language. A Latin edition appeared the following year for his medical colleagues. He can rightly be regarded as the father of epidemiology in this country, the book being written to warn the population about this dreaded epidemic disease.

This mysterious illness first appeared in London in 1485, and there were further outbreaks in this country in 1508, 1517, 1528 and 1551. Initially there was shivering, headache, pains in the neck, shoulders and limbs, which were followed after a few hours by profuse sweating, thirst, headache, palpitations, exhaustion, an irresistible urge to sleep and often death within 24 hours, or frequently even more rapidly than this, sometimes within 3 hours of onset of the disease. Surprisingly, it affected the rich rather than the poor. Thousands died in the epidemic. Its nature remains a mystery: it was not bubonic plague, since there were no characteristic 'buboes', enlarged and ulcerating lymph nodes ('the plague blains'), especially seen in the groins. It may well have been a virulent type of influenza.

Caius' other great love and interest was his old college, Gonville Hall, which had fallen into a rather sorry state of disrepair. He arranged for Queen Mary, his patient, to become College patroness. He made bountiful donations for the enlargement and improvement of the buildings, which included the construction of the three well-known gates. New arrivals passed through the low 'Gate of Humility', normal transit was through the 'Gate of Virtue', while the graduate left through the 'Gate of Honour'. (This third gate is also used for the passage of the bier of a deceased Fellow of the College.)

This generosity led to Gonville Hall being renamed 'Gonville and Caius College' in 1557. Today, the college remains with a strong medical tradition. Two years later, in 1559, Caius was appointed master of Gonville and Caius and occupied this post until just before his death.

His time as master was often stormy and difficult for him. His fellows were young and rather unruly. Protestantism had been introduced by Henry VIII, persecuted by Mary and now strongly embraced by Elizabeth. Caius had Catholic leanings and certainly kept a collection of Catholic vestments and altar ornaments, in order to save the College expenses should it please the monarch to change the religion of the State once again – after all, Caius had seen four alterations in 25 years! His rooms were raided and books and 'much popishe trumpery' were seized and burned. Caius was heartbroken, returned to London and resigned his mastership in 1573.

He died in his house at St Bartholomew's on 29 July of that year, aged 63 years. His body was disembowelled, and the viscera interred in the hospital church. The rest of his remains were taken to Cambridge and buried, 'with the greatest funeral pomp', in the chapel of his College. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: none.