Benjamin Rush: American physician and statesman

Although many distinguished lawyers have achieved fame as statesmen, it is unusual for a leading member of the medical profession to combine his clinical duties with an important career in politics. I believe that the reason for this is very simple – a life in medicine is all-embracing and full of interest and excitement. For the great majority of us, it more than satisfies our professional ambitions. In contrast, the law is extraordinarily tedious. No wonder so many members of that profession seek to satisfy their career aspirations elsewhere – and politics is the easy touch.

An exception to what I might call, with the greatest humility, 'Ellis's law', is the subject of this month's anniversary. Benjamin Rush was not only the leading physician of his day in the emerging United States of America, but also played an important part in the foundation of that country and was a signatory of the American Declaration of Independence. This year marks the 200th anniversary of his death, on 19 April 1813.

Benjamin Rush was born in 1746 in the township of Byberry, outside Philadelphia. His family were comfortably-off, pious Presbyterians. He attended Princeton College in New Jersey, graduated in 1760, then spent 6 years in medical apprenticeship. He then travelled to Edinburgh for further studies, as was the usual practice in those days in colonial America, and took his medical degree there in 1768. He then worked at various hospitals in London and visited clinics in Paris.

Returning home to commence medical practice in 1769, he was promptly appointed professor of chemistry in the College of Philadelphia and the following year published the first textbook on chemistry in the colony. After chemistry, he held in turn the chair of the theory and practice of medicine and of clinical medicine in Philadelphia. His energy was amazing; 65 publications, not including numerous communications to magazines and newspapers. His teaching skills attracted large numbers of students to his classes and he had a very large medical practice.

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As a physician, Rush was a dogmatic theorist, rather than a scientific pathologist – fevers were brought on by overstimulation of the blood vessels and therefore treated by a simple remedy – 'depletion' by blood-letting and purgation. The worse the fever, the more of both treatments that were required...

In the epidemic fevers it was not some contagion as the cause but environmental factors – unhealthy air, poor food and polluted water. During the yellow fever epidemics in Philadelphia in the 1790s, Rush worked heroically among the sick. He ascribed the illness to the damaged coffee beans lying on the wharves, rather than the popular theory that the plague was caused by a miasma emerging from the earth in turning over the soil during construction work.

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Rush was particularly interested in insanity. For many years he spent much time working with the insane patients at the Pennsylvania Hospital. He believed insanity often proceeded from physical causes and was not caused by some mystical 'possession by the devil'. He introduced humane treatment for his patients, in contrast to the punishing regimens of the time. However, he did devise his 'tranquillising chair' in 1810; the manic patient would have his/her legs, arms and trunk fettered to the chair, with his/her head covered by a hood.

Rush's work *Medical Enquiries and Observations on Diseases of the Mind* was published in 1812; it was the first, and for many years the only, treatise on this subject to be published in America. He was repelled by alcoholic intemperance and also by the public corporal punishment of criminals. He spent much energy campaigning against these two evils.

Rush was also heavily involved in American politics in the days before, during and after the American War of Independence (1775–83). He was a member of the radical Provincial Conference in June 1776. He drafted a resolution for independence and was elected to the Continental Congress. On 2 August of that year, Rush was one of the signatories of the Declaration of Independence.

For the first years of the war, Rush served as surgeon and physician general of the middle department of the rebel forces, but early in 1778 he resigned because of what he regarded as mismanagement of the hospitals by his superior. In the same year, he published his *Preserving the Health of Soldiers*, in which he stressed the importance of fresh air and body cleanliness, as well as a clean mind, as important factors in maintaining the fitness of the men. Rush now resumed his practice and teaching of medicine.

However, in 1797 he was appointed Treasurer of the US Mint by President John Adams, and held this office for the rest of his life, continuing, therefore, with his political activities.

Interestingly, Rush's son, Richard (1780–1859), who trained as a lawyer, turned to politics. His main contribution to history is known to us all. As the US Secretary of State he concluded the Rush–Bagot agreement in 1818 with Charles Bagot, then the British minister in Washington. This fixed the 49th parallel as the boundary between Canada and the USA and severely limited the number of warships allowed on either side of this line. Unlike so many treaties, agreements and conventions, it has remained unchanged to the present day. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: none.