

Daniel Whistler: English physician who published the first book on rickets in 1645

Rickets, a crippling disease of children, was once common in the British Isles. Although it is still encountered in some deprived areas of the world, it has now almost disappeared in the UK. Indeed, in 40 years of surgical practice, which included a reasonable amount of orthopaedic and paediatric surgery, I cannot recall seeing a patient with rickets in this country.

Rickets is caused by a deficiency of vitamin D. This vitamin is found in milk and milk products, bread and cereals. However, its principal natural source is that it is synthesized in the skin from 7-dehydrocholesterol when the body is exposed to sunlight. In the western world, it came into prominence in the city slums that grew up as result of the industrial revolution. Here, babies and young children were confined to the narrow and dark streets of the slums on a diet deficient in milk and milk products. The condition became uncommon in the UK in the 1930s as result of vigorous public health measures. As a young schoolboy in the East End of London in 1932, I well remember drinking my daily free one third of a pint bottle of milk in the mid-morning break.

Rickets is rarely recognized before the age of 6 months and is usually picked up at 12–18 months of age. General slow development often calls attention to the condition, the child being late in sitting up and has delayed dentition, while making little attempt to walk. The bones become swollen in the region of the metaphyses, and this includes the costochondral junctions, producing swellings – the ‘rachitic rosary’. Bending of the softened long bones of the legs results in their becoming bowed. Skeletal radiographs demonstrate general osteoporosis with broadening of the metaphyses.

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This year marks the 400th anniversary of the birth of Daniel Whistler (*Figure 1*), an English physician, whose claim to be remembered is that he published the first printed book on this disease.

Daniel Whistler was born in Walthamstow, Essex in 1619. He was sent to school in Thame, Oxfordshire and from there was sent to Merton College, Oxford at the age of 20 years. He graduated Bachelor of Arts in 1642 and, in the summer of that year, proceeded to the University of Leiden to study medicine, in what was recognized as a leading centre of instruction in this subject. At Leiden he graduated Doctor of Medicine in 1645. Whistler's inaugural dissertation for his degree was in Latin, its title, translated into English, was ‘Of the illness in English children in which country it is given the idiomatic name of The Rickets’. This publication was the first written account of this disease and was to be Whistler's only published work. It was reprinted in 1684. The book contains no original observations

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but is written in clear and concise prose and reviews the hypotheses and reports of the views of other, unnamed observers. He proposed the name ‘Paedosplanchnosteocaces’, which, not surprisingly, was never adopted by other authors.

In 1647, Whistler's MD Leiden was incorporated as Doctor of Medicine at the University of Oxford and 2 years later, in 1649, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians. In the Dutch War of 1652, he took care of wounded and sick seamen and, although a physician, his first case was a sailor with a broken arm and

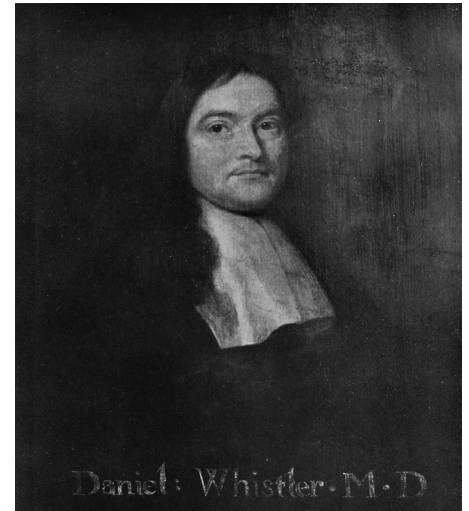


Figure 1. Daniel Whistler (1619–1684).

the second, another with a broken leg. He splinted them both successfully.

In July 1654, Whistler returned to London and began to take an active part in the Royal College of Physicians. Here he delivered the Harveian Oration in 1659, served as censor, registrar, treasurer and, finally, president in 1683. Sad to say, he was not especially distinguished in any of these offices and died of pneumonia, while president, in 1684.

Five years after the appearance of Whistler's thesis, Francis Glisson published his major work in Latin, whose title, translated into English, was ‘On rachitis or the disease of children which is vulgarly called The Rickets’. Glisson graduated at Cambridge, was one of the original Fellows of the Royal Society and for 40 years was Regius Professor of Medicine at Cambridge. However, he spent little time in that city, practicing medicine in London. Among his other works, he gave a good description of the liver and we still talk of ‘Glisson's capsule’. He obviously had first hand experience of rickets and, although his views on the aetiology of the disease was based on disturbance of the four humours, it must be regarded as the best, if not the first, of the early descriptions of the disease. That distinction clearly goes to Daniel Whistler. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: none.