

A Winter's Tale: the barber and the quack

Shakespeare and Medicine: Twins and Siblings was the theme of a conference held at the Royal Society of Medicine on Saturday 1 September 2001. An afternoon of light-hearted science at the Royal Society of Medicine was followed by an evening performance of King Lear at the Globe Theatre, Southwark. The scientific programme culminated in an example of sibling rivalry, in which representatives of the Royal Colleges of Surgeons and Physicians argued over the management of a 16th century patient. The case report and the learned opinions are reproduced by kind permission of Dr Jack Tinker, Dean of the Royal Society of Medicine, and the three participants. No prizes are available for recognition of the patient.

PROLOGUE

Decanus Minor (Associate Dean) Robin Williamson presented this case report to Doctor John Bennett and Master Kenneth Hobbs.

Methinks I have a strange and cryptic case
With which to probe thy wit and learned skill.
The patient's name I durst not document
For he is nobly sired, a puissant lord,
Some three and fifty summers hath he passed,
Yet sorely troubled for the latest two.
Ay, sore's the word, a scummy noisome thing,
The rankest fester that I ever saw,
Upon the upper shank, the inner thigh.
Its stench is stronger than the sensed pain.

But I omit the past in prattling on.
Our patient once enjoyed a lusty youth
And did besport himself in demi-monde.
A privy chancre that was Cupid's tax
With buboes small and tangible like shot,
While soon an ague flares and splitting pate –
Our lord bemoans the vagaries of fate.

Anon, there treads, and timely, on the scene
One Fracastor from distant doge's land*.
A poor luetic shepherd† hath he rhymed
Whose pox was quelled by rare alchemic brew.

Dramatis personae

Professor John Bennett is Physician, Emeritus Professor of Medicine, University of Hull, Treasurer, Royal College of Physicians, London;

Professor Kenneth Hobbs is Surgeon, Emeritus Professor of Surgery, Royal Free Hospital, University of London, Former Dean of Medicine, University of London;

Professor Robin Williamson is Associate Dean, Royal Society of Medicine, Consultant Surgeon, Hammersmith Hospital and Professor of Surgery, Imperial College School of Medicine, London

Quicksilver was the potion that they scribed
(Olympus' messenger with wingèd heel)‡.
Our gallant victim fain would try this cure
And lo!, the rash recedes, the fever calms
The snail-like tracks abate on palatine.
Alackaday the cost is bloody flux,
While aqua regis soon begins to froth.
At length the taint is conquered, health returns
And all is quiet until this recent ill.

So now, good gentles, ply thy tutored art
To rid my lofty malade of his woes,
To heal the ulcer that offends the air
And soothe the hurt that doth inflame his brain –
Contagion thus makes tyrants of us all
And trebly so in those who hold great sway –
Discuss thy rival remedies and choose
To cup, to purge, to dose or cauterise.
Success will bring thee lucre, fame and power,
While failure risks a sojourn in the Tower!

THE QUACK'S OPINION

Doctor John Bennett spake thus:

Master Williamson, you have, with elegance and astute observation, described some aspects of your nobleman's distressed state, and have portrayed some elements of which I would fain know more in offering you my considered reflections and possibilities of cure or relief.

First, I should apprise you of my qualifications for daring to do such things*. A Master of the University of Oxenford, through Gloucester Hall, I am also Doctor Medicinae of the new University of Leyden. Of the College of Physicians, pronounced Royal by virtue of its foundation by our blessed sovereign Henry, the eighth of that name, I am not only a Fellow but Censor. I would warn you, Master Williamson, and also good Master Hobbs, that we will brook no meddling with pills and potions by surgeons, and I take pride that, only two weeks since, I charged a surgeon with giving purgative pills – and it having been found against him he is not only fined but now repenting in prison.

Now to your poxy nobleman. I trust he has a sufficient fortune to meet my bills, for while my care of a patient is always in honesty for his honour and never respecting any private benefit to myself*, yet do I need to feed and clothe my family by means of such fees as I may properly obtain.

Footnotes: Prologue

*Fracastorius, a Venetian poet and author of *Syphilis, sive Morbus Gallicus* (1530). †Syphilus, shepherd and principal character of the Latin poem by Fracastorius. ‡Mercury (Hermes) was the messenger of the Gods.

Now, before proceeding to diagnosis I must always be told three things: the sick person's situation, his age (which you say is three and fifty summers) and whether you have come at the request and with the consent of him. May we understand this to be so?

Then, have you undertaken urinoscopy? Indeed, have you the skill and learning to do so? To distinguish the meaning of the quantity and the hue of the voided urine, its coldness or its heat, and above all its taste, be it acid or sweet? Such information I will need before I can finally pronounce. Similarly I wish to know if his stool is plentiful, and of what frequency, and whether it is adequately coloured to indicate the evacuation of poisons, or pale to indicate retention of noxious substances within the body.

Do not be misled that I believe I can heal the patient by mere inspection of his urine or stool, as do ignorant and inexperienced philosophers seduced by old women's superstitions. I lay much store on hearing the patient's tale from himself and inspecting the diseased parts – but the nature of evacuations cannot be disregarded. Causes of disease cannot be derived from the senses, but signs may indicate the cause appropriate to some particular. The causes are already present; the problem is to recognise which is the relevant one‡.

Now, in preparing my diagnosis I will not rely on astrology, as would Master Simon Forman†, for I trust not his ways; in any case he deals almost entirely with women (in one manner or another) and relies on their credulity with such astrological constructions.

Your rhymes clearly show that your noble friend was rewarded for his lusty youthful occupations by the pox. I lean to the teaching of Montanus who asserts that the pox is a bad, hot and dry dyscrasia impressed in the liver by means of contagion; a putrefactive disease of the total substance§. This vile disease begins with intercourse with some person from whom emanates a poison which attaches itself to the foreskin or (I regret sometimes) the mouth since these parts are loose and more suitable to receive poison. The quality creeps to the veins and thence to the liver, where it changes the liver's natural temperament. It burns up all the natural humours, which pass to other parts of the body, which become full of sharp excrements that can produce ulcers, blisters, joint pains and other fierce manifestations.

Footnotes: The Quack's Opinion

*Wyman AL (1984) John Nowell, an Elizabethan Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians. *J Roy Coll Phys* 18: 166–9. †Kassel L (1999) How to read Simon Forman's casebooks. *Social History of Medicine* 12: 3–18. ‡Richardson LD (1985) The generation of disease: occult causes and diseases of the total substance. In: Wear AW, French RK, Lone IM, eds. *The Medical Renaissance of the 16th Century*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. §Wear A (1985) Explorations in renaissance writings on the practice of medicine. In: Wear AW, French RK, Lone IM, eds. *The Medical Renaissance of the 16th Century*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. ¶Cook J (2001) *Dr Simon Forman*. Chatto and Windus, London

Acknowledgement: I am most grateful to Ms Doreen Leach in the Library and Information Service of the Royal College of Physicians for her great assistance in discovering appropriate accounts of Elizabethan medicine. Their distortion into the fictional account above is all of my doing.

Now, your noble friend, when first suffering the agues, submitted himself to some passing empiric from distant parts of Europe and took some receipt of quicksilver. Of this remedy I have seen little good but much harm arise. Most often it causes the flux, it can give a shaking palsie, and often madness. Sometimes the patient ceases to piss; the urine dries up totally and, being retained, poisons the person to death.

My preferred receipts for the early pox utilize the healing balms of rosemary, hyssop and bugloss, simmered in wine and taken thrice daily for as long as the buboes or fever persist¶. I have seen them often resolve just as much as your nobleman's did under the doubtful care of the Italian's quicksilver.

But now his problem is more indolent. You describe a festering sore upon his thigh with putrefaction advancing. I would fain see this noxious sore myself, but for now I would opine that it denotes the release of contagion, hitherto pent up within his diseased body. It may be that the pox poison has slowly eaten even into his bones and his deeper flesh; or happenstance that quicksilver, retained within his liver, has escaped and forced its poisonous way to the integument.

He should be bled, frequently and freely, and when he has lost enough of his vital power exhibit a purge to cleanse the liver of its retained poison. For the ulcer I offer you this receipt: take mallows, hollyhocks, rose leaves and sheep's suet, boil them well in beer with brown bread, and apply this inunction hot to the diseased parts¶.

At all costs avoid cutting or burning the flesh.

THE BARBER'S CURE

Master Kenneth Hobbs spake thus:

Sir,

**Doctor John Bennett uses words, words, words,
And tries with pseudo-academic arguments
To treat our noble lord. To no avail.**

**Gentles all, I thank you for your welcome.
What honour you on me bestow,
To treat my great imperious lord
Who suffers much the odium of long-standing ill.
The pus must be removed, the pressure on the brain relieved.
I am the one to bring about this cure
With ministrations by the chirurgin's skill.**

**My qualities I would fain expose.
My knowledge comes from learn'd wisdom writ,
And skill from years of travelling – through foreign lands
Of Egypt, France and Italy,
And here at home in England's isle
At Bartholomew's saintly hospital.
From wise sages in these learnèd sites
I gleaned the knowledge of 'Good Medical Practice'.
I' faith, I think that one day it would be
Great value to record these thoughts for all.**

But I digress and must return to theme.
For chirurgie is learned through eye and hand
And Paré*, master in the land of France,
Doth state that no physician gleaned as much
Save for to sleep within a chair and furnish harmful
potions.
While Maimonides† of centuries past
Would have us clean our minds of superstitious trite,
Of planets' influence and astrologic faith
Upon our human destiny.
Instead a scientific way, well proved with rational evidence,
Must dictate the proper lordly management.

I did visit the chamber of our illustrious lord
To hear myself his story, see his hurt,
And learn the ulcer is made worse
By caustic ointments, medicines and foul deeds
Which trapped the pus and caused exacerbation.
Outside his door physicians were gathered
Sniffing their pomanders 'gainst stench of ill
And talking of another noxious salve
To make the ulcer putrefy the more.

No blood letting, purge or salve shall be my way.
The fateful ulcer suffered by my noble lord
Must be excised with sharpened lance.
The whole procedure to be done in clean'd room
By me, in German style‡, with wash'd hands.
But wait, he is too highly priced
To suffer pain of such a cure.
First I will administer a smooth benumbing drink
As Paracelsus§ taught. Laudanum infused in goodly wine,
Which will induce a pain-free sleep until the chirurgy is
o'er.
To staunch the blood, the wound with cobweb will be laid –
For as the current bard hath wisely said 'If I cut my
finger
I shall make bold of you good Master Cobweb'¶ –
On top, I will apply a poultice of ground bread
Upon the which a mould of fungus will have grown

Footnotes: The Barber's Cure

* Ambrose Paré, 16th century French surgeon. †Moses Maimonides, physician and philosopher 1135–1204. Born in Cordova, Spain and settled in Cairo in 1165. See Bloch S (2001) Moses Maimonides' contribution to the biopsychosocial approach in clinical medicine. *Lancet* 358: 829–32; Haeger K (1988) *The Illustrated History of Surgery*. Bell Publishing Co, New York. ‡Haeger K (1988) *The Illustrated History of Surgery*. Bell Publishing Co, New York: 113 quoting Heinrich von Pfoilspeundt (1460). §'Paracelsus'. Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, controversial Swiss-born doctor 1493–1541. ¶A Midsummer Night's Dream (Act 111/1). William Shakespeare. **Bread poultice used to treat priapism by Aretaios (from Cappadocia, who trained and worked in Alexandria about 50 AD) quoted in Haeger K (1988) *The Illustrated History of Surgery*. Bell Publishing Co, New York: 63. In applying this concept the author has used poetic licence. ††Susruta. Possible author of 'Susruta Samhita' written between 800 BC and 400 AD perhaps at Benares, the holy city by the river Ganges. †††Animalcules – small microorganisms seen in water by Antonie van Leewenhoek (1632–1723), a Dutch microscopist. §§Cocaine, a local anaesthetic.

Acknowledgement: I derived great inspiration and historical information from an excellent book: Haeger K (1988) *The Illustrated History of Surgery*. Bell Publishing Co, New York

Since, I have learn'd from Arab** worlds, this purifies the
wound.

I shall hire a goodly nurse to tend the wound.
She shall be, as told me by an ancient Indian sage, –
Susruth†† was his name, –
Of cool head and behaviour agreeable,
Who speaks not ill of all,
Is strong and cares for all his needs,
And follows my instructions with tireless strictness.
With washèd hands, thrice daily shall she irrigate the
wound
With water boiled to kill contain'd animalcules‡‡
Then cooled for comfort.
She shall replace the unguent bread
Until the lesion's fully, cleanly heal'd.

For the pains that do beset his brain
I, from the East, have learn'd to use fine needles
Gently placed into the skin around his neck.
The tension rests, the pain will surely cease.
If perchance this does not cure the agony
Then pressure on the brain must be relieved
By trephine hole within the skull.
This time, to ease the local sore,
I shall the wound infuse with juice of coca leaf§§.
And so my honoured and most regal Lord
I shall return to you the painfree life you richly need.

EPILOGUE

Decanus Minor:

I thank you warmly for this sage advice,
Good Doctor Bennett and kind Master Hobbs,
And trust these cures observe the law of Cos* –
Primum non nocere – this the creed
That governs all right-thinking medicoes
And stays the hand in practising the art.
Your counsels, though of scarce consenting voice,
Permit at least a modicum of choice.

The barge awaits to carry me upstream
To Hampton, where they anxiously await
My present coming. There I shall impart
Your sapient nostrums to my lady Parr†.
Stay calm! Your fees will be imburse'd soon.
Yet I remain uncertain how to spin
Your words into a safe coherent thread
That we can weave to fabricate a cure.
To hope of happy outcome I shall cling
While privately I pray: God save the King.

Exeunt omnes

Footnotes: Epilogue

*The Greek island where Hippocrates practised medicine. †Katherine of that ilk.