A FEW EARLY NOTES ON SYPHILIS IN THE ENGLISH COLONIES OF NORTH AMERICA

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"It is only from the most scanty materials that we can trace the origin and progressive improvements in the healing art among the early settlers of the American colonies," and American medical literature was an almost unknown product before the beginning of the Revolution. In the earliest days there were few physicians in the Colonies, and in New England "the practice of medicine was in many instances united with the parochial duties of ministers of religion, who by their amiable manners, zealous attention and pious converse, endeared themselves to their people."  

The population was too small to attract many physicians, and skilful men of the profession "were of rare occurrence in the colony. They seldom, it would appear, partook of the religious zeal that brought other emigrants across the Atlantic. Dr. Robert Child was one of the earliest physicians to come to New England, though he never practiced medicine there. For a long time he has been given the reputation of being "an advocate of general religious toleration and freedom of conscience," but Kittredge has recently shown that "he abhorred these principles with all the strength of his earnest soul as the devil's latest device for the ruin of society and the damnation of mankind." Instead of toleration and freedom, he, an ardent Presbyterian, was "eager to extend to all his countrymen the blessings of a rigid conformity, . . . and to subvert the Massachusetts government, to bring the Colony under the thumb of a Presbyterian Parliament, to impose the Solemn League and Covenant upon all its inhabitants, and to procure the establishment of the (Presbyterian) Church of England as a state church."  

There is little reference to venereal disease in the colonial literature of the period, and in New England such diseases were undoubtedly rare because of the "stern morality" of the people and because of the severe punishment meted out to those who were discovered in sexual irregularities.

It is also probable that the few who suffered from such afflictions would postpone as long as possible the disclosure of their disease to the physician who was also their pastor, and whose "pious converse"

1. Thatcher, James: American Medical Biography 1:14, 1828.
might be especially unwelcome at such a time. And what would be the plight of an erring youth when, as in the case of John Wilson of Medfield, the pastor, schoolmaster and physician was one and the same person? This good physician was the son of the minister of Boston, of the same name, of whom it was said that he was a man "than whom orthodoxy in New England had no champion more cruel and ungenerous, and whose zeal and passion led him to revile and even strike prisoners being led away from the judgment seat," and who vociferated in his pulpit that "he would carry fire in one hand and faggotts in the other to burn all the Quakers in the world."

**FIRST KNOWN OUTBREAK OF SYPHILIS IN NEW ENGLAND**

The first known outbreak of syphilis in New England occurred in 1646, and is described at length in the "Diary of John Winthrop." Though it has often been quoted, it is curious enough to bear an occasional repetition. Preceding the description by a few pages, is the following entry:

October, 1645. At Ipswich there was a calf brought forth with one head, and three mouths, three noses and six eyes. What these prodigies portended the Lord only knows, and in his due time he will manifest.

The writer does not state that the omen referred to the outbreak of syphilis, but that is the first calamity recorded in his diary.

There fell out also a loathsome disease at Boston, which raised a scandal upon the town and country, though without just cause. One of the town—— having gone cooper in a ship into——, at his return his wife was infected with lues venerea, but which appeared thus: Being delivered of a child, and nothing then appearing, but the midwife, a skilful woman, finding her body as sound as any other, after her delivery, she had a sore breast, whereupon divers neighbors resorting to her, some of them drew her breast, and others suffered their children to draw her, and others let her child suck them (no such disease being suspected by any), by occasion whereof about sixteen persons, men, women and children, were infected, whereby it came at length to be discovered by such in the town as had skill in physick and surgery, but there was not any in the country who had been practised in that cure. But

5. Savage, the editor, adds the following in a footnote: "The first two blanks in this paragraph were once filled, the first probably with the person's name, the second with that of the place, but they have been effectually erased. In such an important narrative it may be of little consequence that it was first written, the man "infected his wife, and leaving her with child went to sea again; the woman knew all, but not what she ailed. So that reports were various. Whether the result, as stated in the text, be the truth or not it is of less consequence than to observe, how the ignorance of our fathers on this topic gives confirmation to the general opinion of their blameless manners."
(see the good providence of God) at that very season there came by accident a young surgeon out of the West Indies, who had had experience of the right way of the cure of the disease. He took them in hand, and through the Lord's blessing recovered them all — in a short time. And it was observed that although many did eat and drink and lodge in bed with those who were infected and had sores, etc., yet none took it of them, but by copulation or sucking. It was very doubtful how the disease came at first. The magistrates examined the husband and wife, but could find no dishonesty in either, nor probable occasion how they should take it by any other (and the husband was found to be free of it). So it was concluded by some that the woman was infected by the mixture of so many spirits of men and women as drew her breast (for so it began). But this is a question to be decided by physicians.

It seems probable that Dr. Child made use of this outbreak of syphilis in his Remonstrance, which was made about the same time, for in it is found the statement that the "hand of our good God ... seems to be against us. ... Yea at this time laying his just hand upon our families, taking away many to Himself, striking others with unwonted malignant sickness, and some with shameful diseases."

**TREATMENT OF SYPHILIS IN COLONIES**

The search for remedies for syphilis among the plants of the New World began almost with its discovery. Guaiac was the most celebrated drug found there. Its virtues were widely heralded, and Fracastor sung of it as follows: The place on

which the Spanish navigators were the first to land ... they called Hispaniola (Hayti). This land is sown with gold; but that which makes a greater wealth for it than gold is the precious tree to which the natives of the country have given the name of Guaiac. ... And Diana, O Prodigy, has not completed her career when the action of the remedy is already revealed. The pustules dry, the ulcers heal, the pains disappear, and the flower of youth is born again with the return of health.

Many herbs and roots were tried in early Colonial days for syphilis as well as for other diseases. Some were shown to the colonists by the Indians, and native medicines were a necessity, the distance from England and the isolation of the small settlements making a sure supply of medicines impossible. One or two examples of the treatment used for syphilis may be of interest.

A popular medical book, which ran through several editions about 1730, entitled "Every Man His Own Doctor or The Poor Planter's Physician. Prescribing Plain and Easy Means for Persons to Cure

Themselves of All, or Most of the Distempers, Incident to This Climate, and with very Little Charge, the Medicines Being Chiefly of the Growth and Production of This Country," gives the following description of syphilis and its treatment, which is the same as that prescribed for yaws:

The Pox may be cured exactly in the same Manner: And because the Symptoms are much the same, it is very probable, the one was a Graft of the other (i. e., Yaws). The pious Spaniards catch'd it from their Negro Mistresses in the West-Indies, and had the Honour of propagating it from thence to all the rest of the World.

In both cases, confine yourself altogether from eating Flesh, from a strong Drink, and be very careful of catching Cold.

To avoid these Misfortunes, eat seldom of fresh Pork which breeds very gross Humours: live not too near a Swamp; not ever venture upon strange Women, especially upon Ethiopians.

So much for etiology and prophylaxis. The treatment is described as follows:

Take 1 Ounce of the Bark of Sumac Root, 1 Ounce of the inner Bark of Pine, and 2 Ounces of the Bark of Spanish Oak; boil these together in 2 Quarts of Water 'til the Decoction be very strong. Of this Liquor drink a full Pint, Milk-Warm, and immediately after it, Half a Pint, quite cold: and it will give you a powerful Vomit.

The next Morning, take Half a Pint of the same Drink warm, and the same Quantity again in the Evening; and continue to doing, for 6 Weeks, or 2 Months; only the Vomit must be repeated every seventh Day. In the mean Time, gargoyle your Throat, and wash all your Sores and Ulcers with the same warm Liquor, which ought to be made fresh every 2 Days. Beside all this, you must chew the Sumac Root very often, and swallow the healing juice.

Every Night, before you go to Rest, take 2 Pills, made of Turpentine and Deers Dung in equal Quantities.8

Another treatment is of special interest because it was introduced by John Bartram, the botanist. Bartram, who with Benjamin Franklin, was one of the founders of the American Philosophical Society, was not a physician, but he had a penchant for medical matters "and he even acquired so much knowledge of the latter science, as to be very useful: and in many instances he gave great relief to his poor neighbors, who were unable to apply for medicines and assistance to the physicians of the city" (Philadelphia).9

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8. Everyman His Own Doctor or The Poor Planter's Physician, Ed. 2, Williamsburg and Annapolis, William Parks, 1734, p. 50. (A third edition was printed in the same year by B. Franklin. The book has been attributed to John Tennant.)

Lobelia is the plant he described for use in syphilis. This description is found in a pamphlet published as an appendix to Short's Medicina Brittanica, an American edition of which was edited by Bartram, and published in Philadelphia in 1751 by B. Franklin and D. Hall. Few copies of the pamphlet are now to be found. It is entitled: "Mr. Bartram's Appendix: containing Descriptions, Virtues and Uses of sundry Plants of These Northern Parts of America; and Particularly of the Newly Discovered Indian Cure for the Venereal Disease." The book contains this description:

*Lobelia.* This curious Plant riseth from a fibrous Root to three or four Feet high, with a Spike of Blue Flowers surrounding the Stalk for near a Foot in Length: It grows in rich shady Ground; it is a scarce Plant in many Parts of the Country.

The learned Peter Kalm (who gained the Knowledge of it from Colonel Johnson, who learned it from the Indians, who, after great Rewards bestowed on several of them, revealed the Secret to him) saith, That the Roots of this Plant cureth the *Pox* much more perfectly and easily than any mercurial preparations, and is generally used by the *Canada Indians*, for the Cure of themselves, and the *French* that trade amongst them, tho' deeply infected with it. They take a Handful of the Roots, and boil them in a Quart of Water, and drink the Decoction, beginning with Half a Pint at first, if the Patient be weak, then increase the Dose every Day as he can bear its purging; but if he can't bear it every Day, let him omit it a Day or two, then take to it again, as he finds Occasion, until he is cured: They wash the Ulcer with the Decoction; but if it be deep and rotten, they put some Powder of the inner Bark of the Spruce-tree into it, which helps to dry it up, but if the Disease is inveterate, they drink the Decoction of *Ranunculus Folio Reniformis*. An old Sachem told Colonel Johnson of another Shrub, with a red Root, from which proceeds several slender Branches, eighteen Inches or two Feet long, on which grow Spikes of white Flowers, which produce three-square black Seed-Pods; the leaves some of our People drink as Tea, and some smoak it with Tobacco; the Roots of this, bruised and boiled, and the Decoction drank, the Sachem said, he rather preferred to the *Lobelia*; but the *Lobelia* seems to be of the most general Use, and with extraordinary Success.

*More particular Directions how to use the Lobelia-Root for the Venereal Disorder, obtained from the Indians, by Col. J.*

"After making a Decoction of it, the Patient is to drink about two Gills of it very early in the Morning, fasting, the same before Dinner, and Bedtime. Add or diminish as you find it agree with the Patient's Condition: The third Day begin Bathing, and continue it twice a Day, until the Sores are well cleansed, and partly healed, then use the Lotion but once a Day till quite well; observing all the Time to use a slender Diet (vegetable Food, and small Drink) as in other Courses of Physick, a Salivation excepted. These are the Directions I have had from the Person who gave me the Secret." 10

10. Short, Thomas: Medicina Brittanica, Ed. 3, Reprinted, Philadelphia, 1751, B. Franklin and D. Hall. Appendix by John Bartram. Mr. Bartram's Appendix: containing descriptions, virtues and uses of sundry plants of these northern parts of America; and particularly of the newly discovered Indian Cure for the Venereal Disease, p. 5.