

# Texts and Documents

## SAMUEL JOHNSON'S 'THE LIFE OF DR. SYDENHAM'\*

by

LAWRENCE C. MCHENRY

ALTHOUGH Samuel Johnson's 'The Life of Dr. Sydenham' has been occasionally mentioned in the other biographies of Sydenham,<sup>4, 6, 21, 25</sup> it has never been separately reprinted. The various medical biographies by Johnson have been reviewed,<sup>23</sup> and the lives of Frederick Ruysch<sup>8</sup> and Herman Boerhaave have been reprinted,<sup>1</sup> or summarized<sup>2, 9, 27</sup> but the life of Sydenham has received scant attention. Johnson's 'Life of Sydenham', despite being incomplete in its biographical data—indeed even containing errors—is valuable for Johnson's comments on Sydenham, and although the 'Life' will be republished by Liebert in the section of Johnson's early lives in the *Yale Edition of the Complete Works of Samuel Johnson* it is thought worthwhile to make this short sketch on Sydenham available to medical historians. As Professor Hazen remarked ' . . . any early biographical writing by Dr. Johnson . . . deserves to be reprinted at least once'.<sup>7</sup>

Samuel Johnson arrived in London in 1737 and later that year became a hack writer for Edward Cave, editor of the *Gentleman's Magazine*. During these first five years in London when he was struggling to make a living, Johnson's medical and scientific interests were unusually varied. In 1739 he wrote a life of Boerhaave for the *Gentleman's Magazine*, and in 1741 a life of Louis Morin, M.D.<sup>28</sup> His life of Sydenham appeared in the 1742 *Gentleman's Magazine*<sup>10</sup> and with minor changes in John Swan's 1742 translation of Sydenham's *Works*.<sup>11</sup> In neither of these articles nor subsequent ones was the author's name mentioned, but Johnson acknowledged to Boswell writing the 'Life'.<sup>3</sup> Since Cave was the publisher of Swan's first three editions of Sydenham's *Works*, he probably originally gave Johnson the job of writing the life of Sydenham for Swan. The following year in 1743 Johnson wrote the *Proposals* for Robert James's *Medicinal Dictionary* as well as at least nine medical biographies in the *Dictionary*.<sup>23</sup> Although his life of Boerhaave was expanded and reprinted in James's *Dictionary*, no life of Sydenham was included.

Johnson's 'Life of Dr. Sydenham' appeared in subsequent, 1749,<sup>12</sup> 1753,<sup>13</sup> 1763,<sup>14</sup> and 1769<sup>15</sup> editions of Swan's translation of Sydenham's *Works*. In the 1753<sup>12</sup> and subsequent editions of *Works* the year of Sydenham's birth is incorrect, being misprinted 1634 instead of 1624. Another edition of Sydenham's *Works* appeared in 1788 being edited by George Wallis,<sup>16</sup> but in general corresponding to Swan's editions. This too contained Johnson's 'Life' essentially unchanged, but with additional footnotes by Wallis.

The 'Life' reappeared in 1809<sup>17</sup> and 1815<sup>18</sup> in Benjamin Rush's edition of Sydenham's *Works*. Since this was taken from Wallis' edition, the 'Life' was also included, although Rush probably did not realize it had been written by Johnson, for he certainly would have made some comment. In his lecture in 1801 'On the Character of Doctor Sydenham' he made no reference to Johnson's life of Sydenham.<sup>26</sup> Rush met Johnson in 1769 at dinner at Sir Joshua Reynolds',<sup>5</sup> and made many references to Johnson in his *Medical Inquiries and Observations and Diseases of the Mind*.<sup>24</sup>

\* From the Department of History of Medicine and Science, Yale University School of Medicine.

## *Texts and Documents*

In Greenhill's edition of Sydenham's *Works* Latham<sup>21</sup> makes reference to statements in the 'Life', but they are presumed to be comments of Swan rather than the original author, Samuel Johnson. Wallis' edition of Sydenham's *Works* was the last to contain the 'Life' by Johnson.

The 'Life' is reprinted below as it appeared in Swan's second and subsequent editions of Sydenham's *Works*. Certain textual alterations in 1742 and other editions that are really matters of Johnsonian canon rather than medical history will be discussed by Liebert in the Yale edition of Johnson's *Works*.<sup>22</sup>

### THE LIFE OF DR. SYDENHAM

Thomas Sydenham was born in the year 1624 at Winford Eagle in Dorsetshire, where his father, William Sydenham, Esq; had a large fortune. Under whose care he was educated, or in what manner he passed his childhood, whether he made any early discoveries of a genius peculiarly adapted to the study of nature, or gave presages of his future eminence in medicine, no information is to be obtained. We must therefore repress that curiosity which would naturally incline us to watch the first attempts of so vigorous a mind, to pursue it in its childish inquiries, and see it struggling with rustic prejudices, breaking on trifling occasions the shackles of credulity, and giving proofs in its casual excursions, that it was formed to shake off the yoke of prescription, and dispel the phantoms of hypothesis.

That the strength of Sydenham's understanding, the accuracy of his discernment, and ardour of his curiosity might have been remarked from his infancy by a diligent observer, there is no reason to doubt. For there is no instance of a man whose history has been minutely related, that did not in every part of life discover the same proportion of intellectual vigour; but it has been the lot of the greatest part of those who have excelled in science, to be known only by their own writings, and to have left behind them no remembrance of their domestic life, or private transactions, or only such memorials of particular passages as are, on certain occasions, necessarily recorded in public registers.

From these it is discovered, that at the age of eighteen, in 1642, he commenced a commoner of Magdalen-Hall, in Oxford, where it is not probable that he continued long; for he informs us himself, that he was with-held from the university by the commencement of the war, nor is it known in what state of life he engaged, or where he resided during that long series of public commotion. It is indeed reported, that he had a commission in the King's army, but no particular account is given of his military conduct; nor are we told what rank he obtained when he entered into the army, or when, or on what occasion he retired from it.

It is, however, certain, that if ever he took upon him the profession of arms, he spent but few years in the camp; for in 1648 he obtained at Oxford, the degree of Bachelor of Physick, for which, as some medicinal knowledge is necessary, it may be imagined that he spent some time in qualifying himself.

His application to the study of physick was, as he himself relates, produced by an accidental acquaintance with Dr. Cox, a physician eminent at that time in London, who in some sickness prescribed to his brother, and attending him frequently on that occasion, enquired of him what profession he designed to follow. The young man answering him that he was undetermined, the Doctor recommended physic to him, on what account, or with what arguments, it is not related; but his persuasions were so effectual, that Sydenham determined to follow his advice, and retired to Oxford for leisure and opportunity to pursue his studies.

It is evident that this conversation must have happened before his promotion to any degree in physic, because he himself fixes it in the interval of his absence from the university, a circumstance which will enable us to confute many false reports relating to Dr. Sydenham, which have been confidently inculcated, and implicitly believed.

It is the general opinion, that he was made a physician by accident and necessity, and Sir Richard Blackmore reports in plain terms, [preface to his treatise on the small-pox] that he engaged in practice without any preparatory study, or previous knowledge, of the medicinal sciences; and affirms, that when he was consulted by him what books he should read to qualify him for the same profession, he recommended 'Don Quixote'.

## Texts and Documents

That he recommended 'Don Quixote' to Blackmore, we are not allowed to doubt; but the relater is hindered by that self-love, which dazzles all mankind, from discovering that he might intend a satire very different from a general censure of all the ancient and modern writers on medicine, since he might perhaps mean either seriously, or in jest, to insinuate, that Blackmore was not adapted by nature to the study of physic, and that, whether he should read Cervantes or Hippocrates, he would be equally unqualified for practice, and equally unsuccessful in it.\*

Whatsoever was his meaning, nothing is more evident, than that it was a transient sally of an inclination warmed with gaiety, or the negligent effusion of a mind intent on some other employment, and in haste to dismiss a troublesome intruder; for it is certain that Sydenham did not think it impossible to write usefully on medicine, because he has himself written upon it; and it is not probable that he carried his vanity so far, as to imagine that no man has ever acquired the same qualifications besides himself. He could not but know that he rather restored than invented most of his principles, and therefore could not but acknowledge the value of those writers whose doctrines he adopted and enforced.

That he engaged in the practice of physic without any acquaintance with the theory, or knowledge of the opinions or precepts of former writers, is undoubtedly false; for he declares, that after he had, in persuance of his conversation with Dr. Cox, determined upon the profession of physick, he applied himself in earnest to it, and spent several years in the university (*aliquot annos in academica palaestra*) before he began to practise in London.

Nor was he satisfied with the opportunities of knowledge which Oxford afforded, but travelled to Montpellier, as Desault relates [dissertation on consumption] in quest of farther information; Montpellier being at that time the most celebrated school of physick: So far was Sydenham from any contempt of academical institutions, and so far from thinking it reasonable to learn physick by experiments alone, which must necessarily be made at the hazard of life.

What can be demanded beyond this by the most zealous advocate for regular education? What can be expected from the most cautious and most industrious student, than that he should dedicate several years to the rudiments of his art, and travel for further instructions from one university to another?

It is likewise a common opinion, that Sydenham was thirty years old before he formed his resolution of studying physic, for which I can discover no other foundation than one expression in his dedication to Dr. Mapletoft, which seems to have given rise to it by a gross misinterpretation; for he only observes, that from his conversation with Dr. Cox to the publication of that treatise thirty years had intervened.

Whatever may have produced this notion, or how long soever it may have prevailed, it is now proved beyond controversy to be false, since it appears that Sydenham having been for some time absent from the university, returned to it in order to pursue his physical enquiries before he was twenty-four years old, for, in 1648, he was admitted to the degree of Bachelor of Physic.

That such reports should be confidently spread, even among the contemporaries of the author to whom they relate, and obtain in a few years such credit as to require a regular confutation; that it should be imagined that the greatest physician of the age arrived at so high a degree of skill, without any assistance from his predecessors; and that a man, eminent for integrity, practised medicine by chance, and grew wise only by murder, is not to be considered without astonishment.

But if it be on the other part remembered, how much this opinion favours the laziness of some, and the pride of others; how readily some men confide in natural sagacity, and how willingly most would spare themselves the labour of accurate reading and tedious enquiry, it will be easily discovered how much the interest of multitudes was engaged in the production and continuance of this opinion, and how cheaply those of whom it was known that they

\* In his life of Blackmore Johnson relates that Blackmore enquired ' . . . of Dr. Sydenham what authors he should read, and was directed by Sydenham to Don Quixote; which, said he, is a very good book; I read it still.' Johnson continues, 'The perverseness of mankind makes it often mischievous in men of eminence to give way to merriment. The idle and the illiterate will long shelter themselves under this foolish apophthegm.'<sup>90, 93</sup>

practised physic before they studied it, might satisfy themselves and others with the example of the illustrious Sydenham.

It is therefore in an uncommon degree useful to publish a true account of this memorable man, that pride, temerity, and idleness may be deprived of that patronage which they have enjoyed too long; that life may be secured from the dangerous experiments of the ignorant and presumptuous; and that those who shall hereafter assume the important province of superintending the health of others, may learn from this great master of the art, that the only means of arriving at eminence and success are labour and study.

About the same time that he became a Bachelor of Physic, he obtained, by the interest of a relation, a fellowship of All Souls College, having submitted to the subscription required to the authority of the visitors appointed by the parliament, upon what principles, or how consistently with his former conduct, it is now impossible to discover.

When he thought himself qualified for practice, he fixed his residence in Westminster, became Dr. of Physic at Cambridge, received a licence from the College of Physicians, and lived in the first degree of reputation, and the greatest affluence of practice, for many years, without any other enemies than those which he raised by the superior merit of his conduct, the brighter lustre of his abilities, or his improvements of his science, and his contempt of pernicious methods supported only by authority in opposition to sound reason and indubitable experience. These men are indebted to him for concealing their names, when he records their malice, since they have thereby escaped the contempt and detestation of posterity.

The same attention to the benefit of mankind, which animated him in the pursuit of a more salutary practice of medicine, may be supposed to have incited him to declare the result of his enquiries, and communicate those methods of which his sagacity had first conjectured, his experience afterwards confirmed the success; he therefore drew up those writings, which have been from his time the chief guides of physic, and that they might be useful to a great extent, procured them to be put into Latin, partly by Dr. Mapletoft, to whom part is dedicated, and partly by Mr. Havers of Cambridge.

It is a melancholy reflection, that they who have obtained the highest reputation, by preserving or restoring the health of others, have often been hurried away before the natural decline of life, or have passed many of their years under the torments of those distempers, which they profess to relieve. In this number was Sydenham, whose health began to fail in the fifty-second year of his age, by the frequent attacks of the gout, to which he was subject for a great part of his life, and which was afterwards accompanied with the stone in the kidneys, and, its natural consequence, bloody urine.

These were distempers, which even the art of Sydenham could only palliate, without hope of a perfect cure, but which, if he has not been able by his precepts to instruct us to remove, he has, at least, by his example, taught us to bear; for he never betray'd any indecent impatience, or unmanly dejection, under his torments, but supported himself by the reflections of philosophy, and the consolations of religion, and, in every interval of ease applied himself to the assistance of others with his usual assiduity.

After a life thus usefully employed, he died at his house in Pall-Mall on the 29th of December, in the year 1689, and was buried in the isle, near the south door of the church of St. James in Westminster.

What was his character, as a physician, appears from the treatises that he has left, which it is not necessary to epitomise or transcribe; and from them it may likewise be collected, that his skill in physic was not his highest excellence; that his whole character was amiable; that his chief view was the benefit of mankind, and the chief motive of his actions the will of God, whom he mentions with reverence, well becoming the most enlightened and most penetrating mind. He was benevolent, candid, and communicative, sincere and religious; qualities, which it were happy if they would copy from him, who emulate his knowledge, and imitate his methods.

Although it is not intended to discuss the life of Sydenham *per se*, a few additional comments will be made. Johnson is correct in his statement that we unfortunately can add little to our knowledge of Sydenham's early life. He is incorrect, however, in his

## Texts and Documents

statement that Sydenham served in the King's army during the Puritan Revolution (1642–51). Sydenham enrolled in Oxford in May 1642, but left in August 1642 when the war started. He became a 'captain of horse' in Cromwell's army, was taken prisoner in 1643, but escaped to distinguish himself for bravery in 1644. In 1646 he resigned his commission and re-entered Oxford. The conversation with Dr. Cox, his brother's physician, took place in 1646, on his way to Oxford where he returned to study medicine and to receive his Bachelor of Physick on April 14, 1648. The remaining facts of Sydenham's medical career are essentially as Johnson outlines them, but are to be found in more detail in the standard biographies of Sydenham,<sup>4, 21, 25</sup> particularly the recent article by Dewhurst.<sup>6</sup>

Although Sydenham was not among the physicians quoted in Johnson's *Dictionary*, nor were Sydenham's *Works* found among the medical books in Johnson's library, there is little doubt that he was familiar with Sydenham's doctrines. Johnson, familiar with the ancient physicians, realized that Sydenham 'rather restored than invented most of his principles'. Both were sufferers from gout and at some time Johnson probably read Sydenham's classic treatise on the gout, for in the descriptions of his six different attacks and their treatment, Johnson, in general, followed Sydenham's principles of 'physick and fasting' or purging and abstinence, rather than phlebotomy. This is further brought out in Johnson's life of Cave,<sup>19</sup> where he writes that Cave: 'endeavoured to cure or alleviate by a total abstinence both from strong liquors and animal food. From animal food he abstained about four years, and from strong liquors much longer; but the gout continued unconquered, perhaps unabated.' This appeared in 1754, nearly twenty years before Johnson's first attack, but it is evidence of his early interest in the disease and its alleviation. Johnson's concept, however, of the gout as an antagonist to the palsy was a common idea of the relation of gout to other diseases, and is not to be found in Sydenham's treatise on gout.<sup>24</sup>

As a final note a book-review in the February 1751 *Gentleman's Magazine*, page 95, attributed to Johnson by Sherbo<sup>28</sup> should be mentioned, for Johnson gives a worthy comment on the efficacy of medicines and concludes with a reference to Sydenham:\*

An exposition of the uncertainties in the practice of physic. By *Benito Geronimo Feijo*, master general of the order of St. *Benedict*. 1s. *Tonson*. This treatise is intended to show the total inefficacy of physick for the restoration of health. The author has published 9 volumes in the *Spanish* tongue, chiefly on popular errors. By this work he appears to have great abilities, yet he seems to have display'd them rather in favour of scepticism than truth. The effect of medicines with respect to the cure of particular diseases, is indeed a great degree uncertain, and they are frequently appl'd without success, because the disease is not sufficiently known, and the circumstances of the patient with respect to situation, habit, manner of life, and constitution are not regarded with sufficient attention. But tho' medicines are sometimes applied without success, the effects of many are known and certain: Ipecacuana will vomit, manna will purge, and mercury will salivate; therefore whenever vomiting, purging, or salivating are necessary, of which in many cases there can be no doubt, it is evident that medicines may restore health. From the great modesty with which Sydenham, of whom the author gives an high character, expresses himself with respect to the best method of treating diseases, he infers that those who are most skilled in physic are most doubtful of its success. But if his position be true, Sydenham could deserve no encomium as a physician, however he might excel as a philosopher.

\* Sherbo<sup>28</sup> says this may be Johnson's, for 'he was interested in medicine; the style suggests his hand; and he singles out for comment Dr. Sydenham, whose life he himself had written for the 1742 GM'. What is more, Sherbo notes that item 494 of the Sales Catalogue of Johnson's library was 'Brett's works of Feyjeo, 4 vols.'



REFERENCES

1. ATKINSON, EDWARD R., Samuel Johnson's life of Boerhaave, *J. Chem. Educ.*, 1942, 19, 103-8.
2. BLACK, D. A. K., Johnson on Boerhaave, *Med. Hist.*, 1959, 3, 325-9.
3. BOSWELL, JAMES, *Life of Johnson, together with Boswell's journal of a tour to the Hebrides and Johnson's diary of a journey to North Wales*, edited by G. B. Hill, revised and enlarged by L. F. Powell, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1934-50, 6 vols.
4. COMRIE, JOHN D., *Selected works of Thomas Sydenham, M.D. with a short biography and explanatory notes*, London: John Bale, Sons and Danielson, Ltd., 1922.
5. BUTTERFIELD, H. L., *Benjamin Rush's reminiscences of Boswell & Johnson*, privately printed by the author, 1946.
6. DEWHURST, KENNETH, Thomas Sydenham (1624-1689), reformer of clinical medicine, *Med. Hist.*, 1962, 6, 101-18.
7. HAZEN, ALLEN T., Samuel Johnson and Dr. Robert James, *Bull. Hist. Med.*, 1936, 4, 455-65.
8. — Johnson's life of Frederic Ruysch, *Bull. Hist. Med.*, 1939, 7, 325-34.
9. HESS, WALTER C., Samuel Johnson's Life of Boerhaave, *Georgetown med. Bull.*, 1962, 25, 256-8.
10. JOHNSON, SAMUEL, The Life of Dr. Sydenham, *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1742, 12, 633-5.
11. — 'The life of Dr. Sydenham'. In: *The entire works of Dr. Thomas Sydenham, newly made English from the originals; wherein the history of acute and chronic diseases, and the safest and most effectual methods of treating them, are faithfully, clearly and accurately delivered*, 1st ed., by John Swan, London: Printed for Edward Cave at St. John's Gate, 1742.
12. — *ibid.* 2nd ed., London: Printed for Edward Cave at St. John's Gate, 1749.
13. — *ibid.* 3rd ed., London: Printed for E. Cave at St. John's Gate, 1753.
14. — *ibid.* 4th ed., London: Printed by R. Cave at St. John's Gate, 1763.
15. — *ibid.* 5th ed., London: Printed for F. Newberry, at the corner of St. Paul's Church yard, 1769.
16. — 'The life of Dr. Sydenham.' In: *The works of Thomas Sydenham, M.D. on acute and chronic diseases; wherein their histories and modes of cure, as recited by him, are delivered with accuracy and perspicacity*, by George Wallis, M.D., 2 vols., London: Printed for G. C. J. and J. Robinson, W. Otridge, S. Hayes, and E. Newberry, 1788.
17. — 'The life of Dr. Sydenham.' In: *The works of Thomas Sydenham, M.D., on acute and chronic disease; with their histories and modes of cure, with notes, intended to accommodate them to the present state of medicine, and to the climate and diseases of the United States*, by Benjamin Rush, M.D., Philadelphia, published by Benjamin and Thomas Kite, 1809.
18. — *ibid.*, Philadelphia, published by B. & T. Kite, Johnson & Warner, E. Kimber, E. Parker, J. Richardson, and I. Pierce, 1815.
19. — 'Cave.' In: *The works of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., a new edition in twelve volumes, with an essay on his life and genius by Arthur Murphy, Esq.*, London, printed for T. Longman, etc., 12 vols, 1792.
20. — *Lives of the English Poets*, edited by G. B. Hill, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1905, 3 vols.



Brass in Thames Ditton Church, Surrey, commemorating Cuthbert Blackeden, apothecary, ' . . . while he lived Sariant of the confectionary to King Henry theight who departed this lief in Anno dñi 1540.' He is figured on left, with the arms of Blackeden. Erected by Julian Boothe in 1580 to her two husbands: (i) Blackeden, (ii) John Boothe. *Surrey Arch. Collns.* 1914, 27, 75. (By courtesy of the Surrey Archaeological Society.) (See Matthews: 'Royal Apothecaries of the Tudor Period', pp. 170-180)

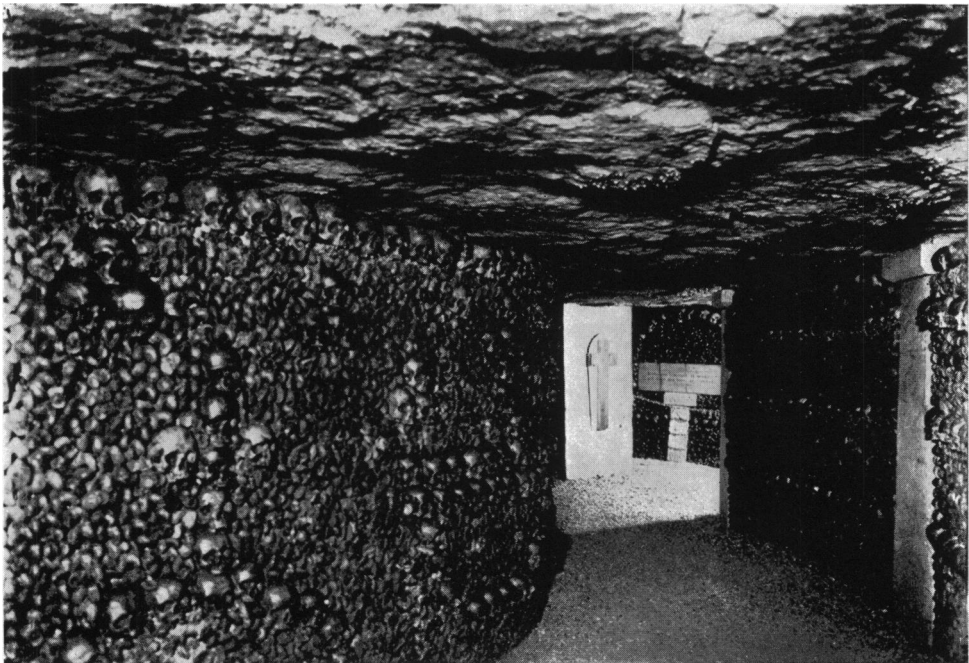


Fig. 1 The Catacombs of Paris (See Møller-Christensen & Jopling: 'An examination of the skulls in the Catacombs of Paris,' pp. 187-188)

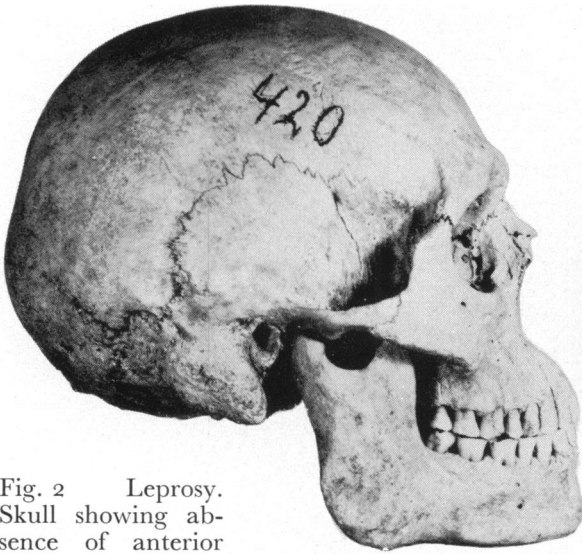


Fig. 2 Leprosy. Skull showing absence of anterior nasal spine

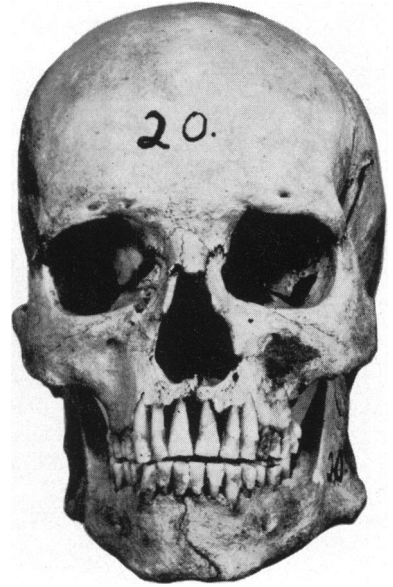


Fig. 3 Leprosy. Skull showing central atrophy of the maxillary alveolar process. Hence loosening or loss of the upper central incisors, in a young person, may be a pointer to the diagnosis of leprosy



Fig. 4 Syphilis. Skull showing typical changes

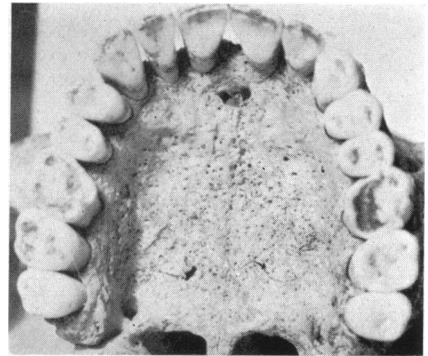


Fig. 5 Leprosy. Hard palate showing inflammatory changes



### *News, Notes and Queries*

21. LATHAM, R. G. In: *The works of Thomas Sydenham translated from the Latin edition of Dr. Greenhill with a life of the author by R. G. Latham*, 2 vols., London Sydenham Society, 1848–50.
22. LIEBERT, HERMAN, Personal communication.
23. MCHENRY, LAWRENCE C., Jr., Dr. Samuel Johnson's medical biographies, *J. Hist. Med.*, 1959, 14, 289–310.
24. — Samuel Johnson's medical illness and his 'Aegri Ephemericis'. To be published.
25. PAYNE, J. F., 'Thomas Sydenham.' In: *Dictionary of National Biography*, edited by Sidney Lee, London, Smith Elder & Co., 1898, vol. 55, pp. 246–53.
26. RUSH, BENJAMIN, 'Lecture II, On the character of Doctor Sydenham,' In: *Six introductory lectures to courses of lectures upon the institute and practice of medicine delivered at the University of Pennsylvania*, Philadelphia, published by John Conrad & Co., etc., pp. 41–64, 1801.
27. SCHNECK, JEROME M., Herman Boerhaave and Samuel Johnson, *J. Amer. Med. Assoc.*, 1956, 161, 1414–15.
28. SHERBO, ARTHUR, 'Samuel Johnson and *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 1750–1755.' In: *Johnsonian Studies*, edit. M. Wahba, Cairo, 1962, pp. 133–59.

## *News, Notes and Queries*

---

### AN EXAMINATION OF THE SKULLS IN THE CATACOMBS OF PARIS

LITTLE is known about the early history of leprosy in Europe, and although it is generally believed that the highest incidence of the disease was in the Middle Ages, there is very little reliable evidence on which medical historians can base an opinion. The only way of obtaining definite evidence on this subject is to make use of the fact that the lepromatous type of leprosy causes permanent and characteristic changes in bones, and one means of obtaining such evidence is the difficult and laborious task of locating medieval graveyards and examining their contents. One of us has carried out such a study in Denmark,<sup>2, 3</sup> and has established the value of examining the skull in surveys of this type. Another way of gaining information is to study ready-made collections of bones wherever they may be found, for example, the Catacombs of Paris and Rome, and the various museums exhibiting bones; but this is not likely to prove of value unless their origin and age are known.

In order to discover if an examination of a large collection of skulls would supply information on the past incidence of leprosy, we decided to pay a visit to the Catacombs of Paris, and the Scientific Office of the French Embassy in London kindly arranged for the necessary permit and for the services of a guide.

#### *The Catacombs*

During the eighteenth century the people of Paris made repeated protests that the 'Cemetery of the Innocents', which had been in existence for many centuries, constituted a public health danger, and in 1785 the authorities demolished the cemetery and removed the contents to the old stone quarry of Paris—a vast underground system of tunnels and passages. The work of transferring these skeletons took fifteen months, after which the new subterranean site received the contents of other cemeteries as well as the bodies of those massacred during the French Revolution.

The visitor to the Catacombs descends ninety-one stone steps (62 feet) before