

Texts and Documents

THE FIRST MEDICAL MONOGRAPH ON THE GOUT

'On whether it is possible to cure the gout or no'.

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The historical library of the Heberden Society¹ has recently been fortunate enough to acquire what we believe to be the earliest printed medical monograph on Gout: it was published in Germany. This treatise, dated 1534, was written by Dominicus Burgauer, a physician. The slim quarto volume, printed in Strasbourg by Mathias Apiarius, has eleven leaves. Its title: 'Ob das Podagra möglich zů generen oder nit. Nutzlich zů wissen allen denen die damit behafft' translated from the medieval German reads: 'On whether it is possible to cure the Gout or no—useful to know for all those who suffer from it.' This small treatise contains a surprising amount of sound advice regarding the prevention and cure of the disease. The author is an early advocate of prophylaxis by the exercise of moderation in food, drink, anger and lechery: he recommends moderate regular exercise as well as avoidance of unnecessary purgation, and 'great sadness or anxiety'.

Burgauer, about whom little is known, was evidently an admirer of Rhazes and Avicenna and quotes freely from their works. It is interesting to note, however, that he was evidently also an early follower of Paracelsus as, in addition to his recommendations regarding galenic preparations of herbs, seeds and roots, he attributes therapeutic virtue to metals and precious stones and strongly advocates a compound of metallic gold.

Together with the Burgauer treatise, the Heberden Library has also acquired an anonymous polemic poem written in the form of a Sapphic Ode, illustrated with two striking woodcuts (figs. 1 and 2), and printed in Mainz by J. Schäffer in 1537. It is a quarto volume of sixteen leaves entitled 'Gout defending herself before the judge'. There is a long tradition for this type of satire going back to Willibald Pirckheimer, and right into antiquity to Lucian. (Dr. R. Burgess drew our attention to Robert Eisler's article² which suggests that Dürer, in his engraving 'The Doctor's Dream' intended to illustrate Pirckheimer's satire).

So few early sixteenth-century medical treatises have been translated into English that the following abridged translation of Burgauer's little book seems well worth printing, particularly as it appears to be the first medical treatise on gout.

On whether or not it is possible to cure gout. Useful to know for all those who suffer from it. Composed by DOMINICUS BURGAWER. Doctor of Medicine. Printed at Strassburg by Mathias Apiarius. 1534.

To the Reader. The majority of people believe that gout cannot be cured. Daily experience has convinced them of that. Any remedies found produced only temporary

¹ The Heberden Society's Library is housed at the Royal College of Physicians of London.

² *Burlington Magazine*, 1943, cols. 82–83.

relief. It has become a proverbial saying that this illness cannot be cured, and I have felt it necessary to report on whether this is true or not.

A2^r: What is Gout?

It is a pain in the feet with or without swelling, which comes from dampness or draught. In Latin this disease has many names because it is felt in divers parts of the body. Its general name is *ARTHETICA* which may be rendered as sickness of the limbs. It is also called *GUTTA* which means 'drop' because it is like the drops running down the roofs to the ground. If the flux or matter goes into the hands it is called *CIRAGIA*, into the hip *SCIATICA*, into the knees *GENUGRA*, and into the feet *PODAGRA*.

It is necessary to know its cause. Prevention is possible if one knows this. It comes from outward or inward sudden changes to exaggerated cold or heat.

A2^v: The cold can be caused by superfluous food, superfluous sleep and constant idleness. For, as Rhazes says, pain does not attack those who work, only those who do not have to work, and this is true as long as a moderate amount of work is done. For if people work too hard they weaken their limbs and contract fluxes easily. The disease also comes from great sadness, and from excessive venery, especially after meals, for Hippocrates and other philosophers say eunuchs and those who have nothing to do with women do not get it. Those who are immoderate in this respect contract the disease easily because they are deprived by it of the most subtle substance of the third digestion by which the outer parts of the body are preserved, guided and nourished.

Similarly harmful is inordinate eating and drinking, mixing one's wines, which stifles natural heat, whereby superfluous fluids are collected in the body, and this happens to the grand gentlemen who have all their heart desires.

Also, drinking a lot of white wine on an empty stomach and using much vinegar aids its acquisition. So too do unnecessary purgations, or if nature fails to expel several superfluities; or, if all matter has not been consumed after a lengthy disease, it sinks into the limbs; also after colic it often happens.

All this has been said concisely by Rhazes.

A3^r: A cold complexion, inherited from the parents, baths, moving about after meals, and whatever causes a bad digestion, generates podagra, and if one brings those fluxes to a standstill which are in the habit of running in a certain place.

The internal causes are weak joints, width of the channels; if the limbs are very strong they expel their abundance to the lesser and weaker parts, especially if natural digestion is weakened such as in old people or those suffering from illness.

According to the old teachers, podagra can be found in three types of complexion: 1. Those who are full-blooded. 2. Those retaining much dampness. 3. Those in whom damp substances are mixed.

It may also have its cause in winds to be found in the cavities of the joints which distend the veins of the sinews and the ligaments so as to produce great pains.

A3^v: It is not true, as the common people think, that diseases are the same in everybody and that their cause is always the same. Therefore one should take note of the symptoms with great care.

Sometimes the pain does not come from flowing dampness but the limb is changed in such a way that the colour of the limb is changed and there is no ulcer or swelling. If it comes from draught the colour is not changed, the limb feels tight, and the pain wanders from one limb to the next.

Though it comes rarely without additional dampness, it may have many causes. [Then its symptoms in the sanguine person are described.]

A4^r: [Describes them in the choleric, phlegmatic and melancholic temperament.]

A4^v: [Diagnosis from the urine.]

B1^r: If someone is born with wide, big veins, with a hot and damp complexion, if he is attacked by gout it will rarely leave him. It may weaken a joint so much that it gets reduced and finally disappears.

Texts and Documents

Though the ulcers in the joints are shallower than in other parts they are less easy to cure.

B1^v: Rhazes and others confirm that if matter becomes thick and hard in the joints it will not return into its right proportion. Ovid says in his *Liber de Ponto*: 'Solvere nodosam nescit medicina podagram'. 'Nodosa podagra' means knotty gout, where matter immediately becomes sclerotic or stony.

[Quotations from Rhazes and Avicenna]. The mixture of two dampnesses can be understood in such a way that if you put on an embrocation one day it may help and relieve, and the next day it will not help at all.

B2^r: The disease in the hands called chiragra recovers sooner than podagra or sciatica because its matter is not so earthy. The reason why podagra is so difficult to cure is because the feet are the lowest part of the body and matter keeps on sinking down and what has once sunk in cannot easily be driven out again.

But though a longstanding podagra cannot be completely cured, in the beginning this can be done if one goes about it in the right way.

B2^r: (One should avoid all the activities which cause it as mentioned above.) One should take medicine in good time. (But God the Almighty likes to make exceptions sometimes, and I have found not everything the Ancients have written is true.) Some inquirers into the secrets of nature write that one can, after long preparation, obtain a compound which, when cooked in this way, is able not only to transmute imperfect metals into perfection [**B3^r:**] and to change them but also to heal quickly and indubitably all diseases however they had been sent by God and however long they had lasted, provided they had not reached the boundary set to them by God. Among those who teach this is an excellent doctor, Arnoldus de Villa Nova, and many others report on this. Reason and experience, too, teach that this is true, for metals are something rather strange and he who is able to prepare them rightly can do more with medicine than one who works with all the medicines written on by doctors. This is credible and natural because this medicine can purify and transmute a base metal in half an hour and less which before has been unclean. That which had been too hard, soft or inelastic is soon made pure, beautiful, clean and elastic. How much more will it be able to change that which can be more easily changed, as one knows of gold that it cures the plague which otherwise it is impossible to cure. Whoever is able to make this medicine, I firmly believe he can also cure a chronic gout. Therefore he who has this medicine should thank God for it is a medicine above doctors' medicines on earth, and few have found it, also few will find it.

Secondly, there is still much hidden power in herbs and roots which is not known to us as yet, for instance, one has found several herbs of which the Ancients have not written. That is probably why Hermes says that he who would know the hidden power of herbs, seeds and roots, also metals, would accomplish such things as would seem incredible to be brought about by natural means and would be regarded as a miracle brought about by the black art or through supernatural means. Now, it may be possible that someone is specially gifted by God to find something special [**B3^v:**] previously unknown just as one has, within recent memory, thought out something against the French disease. Therefore I would not deny that one might accomplish something for I have myself allayed the pain swiftly and with harmless medicines which usually lasts a fortnight, three weeks or much longer, and removed the disease in such a way that those of whom some had been bedridden and incapable of using their limbs for two years, for several years after were left unmolested by it. Others had been bedridden for sixteen weeks, others more or less, who have recovered and are now hale and sound, of whom many had been suffering from sciatica and arthritis. The ancient physicians have also cured several and have seen several being cured of which Avicenna writes in Fen. 20, tractatus 2, capitulum 10, also Rhazes in the *Liber Divisionum*, that several have used a special piece and have been healed by it. Of this tell Anthonius Guanerius, also Mattheus [Ferrarius] de Gradibus;



Figure 1.

'Neither medicine nor fire, water or air can cure knotty podagra.' (See p. 288.)



Figure 2.

'The sufferers from gout accuse her.' (These two woodcuts illustrate an anonymous polemic poem written in the form of a Sapphic Ode, Mainz, J. Schäfer, 1537, bound with Burgauer's treatise.)

and I have also heard it from a trustworthy nobleman whose wife had been suffering from arthritis and had often been laid up for sixteen weeks and who had been prescribed a water which purged her as soon as she had taken three drops and in the morning she felt no more [pain]. This she has done as often as it started to come on, and finally it stayed away altogether. This water also gave her appetite to eat, and that is quite natural, for I have it too and know how to acquire it. I have also seen marvellous things accomplished with it and heard from a trustworthy person that it drove away fever, gout, dropsy, which not every doctor can do. In addition, a trustworthy person said to me that, after he had been laid up for two years and no longer able to stand on his feet, somebody came to him and gave him a medicine which cured him in such a way that he became capable of walking again, and for two years he felt nothing more, [B4^r:] and he thought he might have recovered completely if he had not lived in such an immoderate fashion. I, too, have used this medicine and often cured cold diseases with it in some to whom God had been willing to grant it.

But it is the fault of the sick and the doctors that nowadays it is not believed that it can be prevented because one has not given it enough constructive thought. During the first years and in the initial stages it is quite possible to tackle it. Above all, it is the fault of the doctors in many ways, particularly when they are called to a patient they have soon applied *repercussiva* and cold things to the pains and driven them inwards that the matter could no longer be resolved. Of such an ignorant doctor writes Anthonius Gaianerius,* himself a very learned doctor: he tells of a Jew who ruined somebody with a *repercussiva* so that his thighs became inflamed so that the good man suffering of the podagra had to die, and that they do all the time rather than to purge, which is contrary to the custom of the most learned doctors. Moreover, several put *attractiva* on, which are the things which draw it out and this they do while the matter is in flux which is a grave mistake. For while the matter is in flux and is drawn forth through the pain, one should not go on drawing it. They should not lay the *repercussiva* on the painful spot but a good way higher up so as to see to it that not much matter from the body should come down to it.

Thus, while the pain lasts they should put neither *repercussiva* nor *attractiva* on it. Furthermore, the doctors are mistaken in purging once or several times if they do not notice that the painful matter comes all from the joints, and if they do not resolve it completely some matter remains behind and weakens the limb.

B4^v: After this something may easily disturb the matter and the longer this lasts the more painful it becomes. Furthermore, they are mistaken in trying to uproot it with either *Solutiva* or with plasters whereas they need both, or else they use steam treatment unable to remove matter so that they then think *solutiva* are going to draw it upwards if only they are given often enough. In this way they weaken the stomach and the circumference round the centre is too wide to be able to draw it upwards. Finally, they are mistaken in not giving *praeservativa* which prevent a person from contracting it which may well be done as long as the person is prepared to live sensibly. In the same way, the patients are guilty in not doing anything for it in time before the limbs die off or become lame because of the protracted disease; for during the time when it only lasts a month and he who has it can walk well afterwards and feels well too except towards autumn and spring, one may well find a medicine for it so that it would not recur. If he is used to a flux issuing in a different place, that is defecation, who would doubt that, just as one can prevent accidents in other diseases, if one drove out the fluxes habitually flowing into the joints through defecation, it would stay away, and particularly that which originates from phlegm? For when the cause which is the flux is taken away the result from it, too, stays away. But the greater part of those who suffer from it are rich and powerful who do not live sensibly but do that which brings the disease and avoid that which would drive it away; therefore they are not cured. For we Germans are so keen on eating and drinking that

* for Guainerius

we would rather suffer great pains than leave off superfluous eating and drinking. This greatly harms our body, our soul and our property. From this one may gather [C1^r:] that the disease in itself is not incurable except if those suffering from it do not live sensibly. Those mainly concerned generally despise medicine. Taking no exercise, they ought to consider that so much food and drink consumed superfluously cannot be digested, whereby superfluity is collected in the body which when it drops down they do nothing to bring up again. Thus it is impossible for a man to be cured unless the painful matter be removed. [Text omitted.]

Now a person might say 'If I use so many purgations I bring on indigestion and this is nearly as bad as having the gout'. Reply:—It is true that too many purgations weaken the stomach and one's nature, but one can have noble medicine which does not weaken at all and yet in advance consumes the matter which later on would cause the disease. To finish my argument I say that one may well have a way by which one can drive out the pain and prevent it which is pleasing to nature, harmless and altogether pleasant, wherever a cure is possible. I am excepting here the long-standing cases or the inherited ones or [C1^v:] those deriving from the mixture of different types of dampness, for those can hardly be put in order. I also say that the medicine which can do this serves this end not in an ordinary manner, but almost miraculously through a special quality.

If it were ordinary it would by now surely have been found in the pharmacies. Even if it were found there one would still not know the right composition of it. For it often happens in many a disease that a herb or root has a special quality which drives away the disease, and if one mixes some more items with it, this spoils its effect (as I could well give examples of, but shall, for the sake of peace, refrain from) so that that which it possesses by nature and quality will not be capable of accomplishing its task. For it happens with many ointments, electuaries and similar compounds that perhaps one item is contained in it which alone might achieve much more than when it is combined with all the others in the compound. For if one combines those of a contrasting nature the good that one may do to a disease is thwarted by the other ingredient. For while we are made of the four qualities, a doctor must see to it that he hits on the right one and that he chooses that which will take away the disease and not mix too many together . . . This is important to know when diagnosing a disease and when dispensing a medicine . . . [C2^r] Take for example *ungentum Agrippae*. That is an ointment made in a pharmacy composed of several roots causing no harm in treating the disease of the joints. It is composed of four pounds of roots, about twelve pounds of oil and several pounds of wax. Even if the roots and their juice had some quality helpful for treating this disease its effect is so much cancelled out by the quality of oil and wax that it is useless, while it would work on its own. For each time the preponderant ingredient also is strongest in the effect, and as there are four parts of oil, with the wax about five and only one part of roots, how then can the one in lesser quantity show its power? If the more excellent one is neglected it indeed has to follow in the wake of the majority. For when there are four parts of water and one part of wine the water will prevail and the wine necessarily lose its goodness. This happens with many compounds. About this I want to write more at a later date if God allows me to live so long, and show the current mistakes in medicine.

Therefore I say that even if something serviceable is found in a pharmacy there is still some fault in it as I have just shown. I have also said that the effective medicine is hidden and works through a special quality. In nature one finds much affected by one thing or another and yet one cannot give the reason for it . . . [C2^v:] For example, if a woman about to give birth holds a magnet in her hand, and specially in her left hand, her childbirth is much easier. This can also be understood of *aquilegium* (columbine). I have myself watched a woman recover much more easily from childbed with its aid. Furthermore, if one hangs a hyacinth gem on one's neck it drives away heart disease, and a sapphire cures swellings and plague-boils (apostemata) just as

water extinguishes fire, and many other qualities of natural things can be enumerated.

For there is rarely a natural remedy called in medicine a *simplex* which has not, apart from being cold, warm, wet or dry, a special property, power and virtue in its efficacy, and God has implanted and endowed many more as yet unknown to us. It is either due to our sinfulness or that medicine is not quite ready that we have not yet encountered many of these remedies and that their effect has not yet been demonstrated.

For although one knows that precious stones have certain powers, as do herbs and roots, it happens that they are either faked and adulterated or too old or otherwise corrupted so that one does not obtain what one wishes for.

In this way one can have hidden remedies for this disease which are capable of preserving one from it, and that cannot be done by anything ordinary, therefore what I have told now has not been seen before, though it is true that one has the wood [guaiacum] against the French disease, which has helped many people. [Text omitted]. [C3^r:] . . . Decide therefore that the medicine must be prepared in such a way that it strengthens, increases and opens the natural heat and leave the heart strong and no evil or putrefaction in the body. One can and may well have this which can work just in this way and is indestructible and with as much power as is in it, it can work on others.

Now this case has been pleaded in such a way that everyone can feel that the opinion presented was a good and suitable one. For if the disease has attacked somebody and the flux has descended, and one has tried whether heat, cold, wet or dryness have been the cause, if one then wants to practise, while repudiating the opinion that any of those four were the cause, this should be done only by suitable remedies which have a special property. First, by stopping the fluxes about to descend from above, one should keep the pains stationary.

[C3^v:] Then one should allay the pain with something for three days and nights which can resolve even a very hot ulcer (as I have often seen and experienced), can mitigate the pain and remove the swelling in such a way that it disappears imperceptibly, and if it lies still too deeply in the veins there are remedies by which one can soon bring it out into the skin so as to be better able to get at it.

Then the pain has gone. If then something has remained behind which might do harm and go against the system of veins one should resolve this completely as can well be done, until there is nothing foreign or unnatural present any more. After this one should be moderate in eating and drinking and once a month take something to prevent this disease. In this way the disease can be completely expelled and prevented so that it cannot easily return, but one cannot help everybody, as I have protested before; for sometimes people have left it too long, sometimes God punishes someone in this way for his sinfulness and humiliates and chastises him so that he will know Him better than before. With those no medicine will help, for whoever God attacks will not be saved by natural agencies until it pleases Him. I will leave it at that, and if anyone of high or low birth would like more of it he shall get useful information from me.