ORIGIN OF GONORRHOEA AND NON-SPECIFIC URETHRITIS*

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Rolleston (1934) showed that syphilis did not exist in ancient Greece and Rome. Although he stated that there is no reference to venereal disease in classical literature, in the Arabian Nights, Villon, or Boccaccio’s "Decameron", he rather lamely accepted the well-known passage in "Leviticus" as an indisputable reference to gonorrhoea, and thought that in the prevailing squalor the symptoms and signs passed unnoticed for a thousand years.

More recently Dr. H. St. H. Vertue (1953) re-opened the subject with a masterly and even more complete review of classical literature. His article may be summarized as follows:

It is generally believed that gonococcal urethritis or gonorrhoea is as old as man, or at least originated in the promiscuous squalor of the ancient eastern civilizations. But not a single mention of the disease can be found in a search through classical, general, and medical literature from the times of Hippocrates to Galen and later. The most cogent arguments of all are perhaps that Juvenal does not note it in any of his sixteen satires, and that Galen, a very acute observer, also fails to describe it. Actually Galen (2nd cent.) did mention gonorrhoea, but defined it as an unwanted excretion or seeping of semen. Later the Greek word, which means exactly this, was wrongly applied to a contagious urethritis, which probably arose during the dark Ages. According to Beckett (1717-18, 1723) this was first described by John of Arderne (about 1380) as a burning inflammation (incendium interitus), and by another 14th-century writer, whose manuscript (1393) was in Beckett’s possession, as Brenning of the Pyntyl, yat Men call ye Apegalle; it was mistakenly identified with Galen’s gonorrhoea by those who could not believe that the master would have missed or omitted it. Galen’s famous contemporary, Arataeus of Cappadocia (2nd cent.) likewise described a persistent flow of semen, but it is equally impossible to read into this what we mean by gonorrhoea. Celsus in the first century A.D. wrote in the same vein: "There is a fault in the genital region called a shedding of semen. It occurs without sexual desire or erotic dreams, and in such a way that after a time the patient is consumed with wasting."

Vertue found no mention of contagious urethritis in the writings of Hippocrates or in classical Greek literature; the freely quoted passage in "Leviticus", XV, “When any man hath a running issue out of his flesh”, surely must not be misconstrued from the general to the particular; nor is Horace’s or Ovid’s carefree world of courtesans and brothels marred by a single reference to venereal disease. The inescapable conclusion is, therefore, that venereal disease just did not exist in the classical world. To carry the matter still further, we find that the great Arabian masters, Razes, Avicenna, and Avenzoa, also make no mention of the disease as being in existence in the Dark Ages. (To this formidable array of classical writings may be added Apuleius’s "The Golden Ass" (2nd cent.) and Suetonius’s "Lives of the Twelve Caesars" (2nd cent.) in neither of which is there any reference to venereal disease.)

The first appearance of gonorrhoea, as we understand it, was probably in early medieval times, but it could not have been prevalent for a century or so, as there is no hint of it in the works of Chaucer, Langland, or Gower; in the Arabian Nights, in Villon’s works, or above all, in the "Decameron" (first edition, Venice, 1471). By 1430, however, the Bishop of Winchester was legislating that no stowholder in his Thames-side domain was to retain a woman that had the sickness of brenning under the extremely severe fine, for those days, of one hundred shillings! By the late sixteenth century it is commonly mentioned or alluded to and had a new name bestowed upon it, namely "clap". It was a feared hazard of promiscuity as is seen in the Mirror for Magistrates (1587):

They give no heed before they get the clap
And then too late they wish they had been wise.

But gonorrhoea was relatively so new that when syphilis appeared hard upon its heels the two were confused:

Time that at last matures a clap to pox
Whose gentle progress makes a calf an ox. (Pope, 1735.)

and so remained through Hunter’s day and until Ricord (1838) at last separated the two diseases.

Vertue’s survey convinces one that venereal disease in the main—syphilis and gonorrhoea—did not exist in ancient Greece and Rome, but what of the explanation of the condition described by Galen, Aretaeus, and Celsus—namely Profusio Seminis? Such a condition cannot be identified with the defaecatory prostatorrhea that worries a few young men, for this is not a persistent discharge; nor does such a semenorrhoea occur today.

* Received for publication November 8, 1954.
as a symptom of neurasthenia. May it not then refer to non-specific or abacterial urethritis? This quiet urethral inflammation comes on some 10 to 20 days after exposure to risk, and the true origin of the disease could easily have been missed in times when incubatory periods had not been recognized. In this connexion it is noteworthy to remember that the venereal origin of syphilis was not recognized for many years.

I therefore addressed the following letter to Dr. Vertue:

I read with very great interest your recent article on the history of gonorrhoea and congratulate you on a masterly, personally conducted, review of classical literature—a splendid feat of scholarship. I became convinced that neither syphilis nor gonorrhoea existed in ancient Greece and Rome, but I cannot accept the explanation given for the Profusio Seminis described by Galen, Aretaeus, and Celsus, namely that this condition is a semenorrhoea or prostatorrhoea, a nervous disorder, or a sign of neurasthenia. In thirty years of practice I should have had ample opportunity to see such cases if they occurred. Granted one does see many cases of prostatorrhoea in young men who come to the clinic complaining of a discharge yesterday or last week, frequently associated with the act of defaecation, but never as described by the classical masters.

(1) It is possible that the condition no longer occurs. This is most unlikely though diseases do alter and even disappear.

(2) The symptoms may have been exaggerated by Galen whose account was copied by subsequent writers; but Aretaeus was a contemporary who did not have access to Galen's writings.

(3) It would appear far more likely that these are descriptions of the signs and symptoms of non-specific urethritis which has only recently attained grudging recognition as an entity.

The delayed onset of this quiet type of inflammation would have effectively masked its venereal origin. It is, of course, difficult to fit in the "wasting" mentioned by Celsus, but any continued discharge when construed as "waste of seed" would induce a concomitant anxiety state.

Dr. Vertue replied:

I am grateful for the opportunity here given me of elucidating a little further the meaning and nature of the ancient "gonorrhoea" or "spermatorrhoea." The popular, not the scientific, beliefs in the matter were briefly these. The seat of the seed, sperma, is in the brain, marrow, knees, and thighs, whence it passes into the bladder, the testicles being simply reservoirs. The seed breathes through the external genitalia and being endowed with life yearns for emission that it may enter another and procreate. The principle of life is the soul, psyche, and this is enclosed in the seed: therefore in the seed is the very life itself (Plato, "Timaeus"). In Latin the notion is the same, with the exchange of genius for psyche and semen for sperma. It is no wonder, then, that the sufferer who believed that his seed was running away complained that he was exhausted, that his limbs were refusing their functions, and his knees giving way, nor that he might lose his reason or even pine away from superstitious terror. What the old writers are describing as "gonorrhoea" or "spermatorrhoea" is a severe "anxiety state," which they named after the symptom most prominent in the patient's own account. Even down to recent times fathers would strike horror into their sons by recounting the awful results of excessive loss of semen. Many medical books used to contain references to this disorder. Impelled by curiosity, I have examined a large American catalogue for the year 1911, that of the library of the Surgeon-General of the U.S.A. No less than a page and a half are occupied by the list of articles on spermatorrhoea, and there is mention of a special institute at Boston devoted to the cure of it. In the First World War I myself was consulted by soldiers, "neurasthenics", about this complaint and verified the truth of what they told me by examining the discharge under the microscope and finding spermatozoa. But the forms of nervousness are determined by the way in which patients regard themselves and are regarded by society: now that the outlook on sex is saner, spermatorrhoea is passing away. One psychiatrist tells me that anxious young men still complain of it, but another has the very opposite experience. Venereologists apparently seldom see it now, though Harkness (1950) mentions a spermatorrhoea, which must be distinguished from urethritis.

My own conclusions on the subject are simply these. The description of "gonorrhoea" or "spermatorrhoea" given by the ancients is a true account of a neurosis, unconnected with venereal disease, which has been in existence down to recent times but is now much on the wane. On the other hand no reasonable man should deny the possibility that a non-specific urethritis may have been in existence and may have been confused with spermatorrhoea, even though actual unmistakable evidence is wanting.

In my view the grim warnings on the effects of excessive loss of semen mentioned in Dr. Vertue's letter were meant to curb or stop masturbation, and I still remain somewhat sceptical regarding spermatorrhoea. The review of classical Greek and Roman literature strongly indicates (though it cannot prove) an absence of gonorrhoea (and syphilis) in that Golden Age. There is nowhere a single reference to the typical inflammation and discharge of gonorrhoea, to stricture, or to ophthalmia neonatorum. But "Leviticus", XV, cannot be dismissed easily. Dr. Vertue considers that "an issue out of his flesh" refers to discharges from wounds and abscesses, but in fact the whole chapter is exclusively devoted to genital discharges in men and women, discharges which the Jewish Elders knew to be infectious and on account of which they made scrupulous rules of hygiene. There is even a distinction made between this infectious issue and the
running of "the seed of copulation," i.e., true spermatorrhoea. If the urethritis had been gonorrhoea it could not have long remained a Biblical scoop. But if the description in vv. 2–18 does not refer to gonorrhoea at least it must indicate the presence of the less spectacular non-specific urethritis in Egypt and Israel in the days of the Old Testament.

REFERENCES

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—(1720). Ibid., 31, 47.


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*Br J Vener Dis* 1955 31: 246-248
doi: 10.1136/sti.31.4.246

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