

VENEREAL DISEASE PHOBIA IN THE 17th CENTURY*

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The sufferer from venereal disease phobia, unfortunately seen so frequently nowadays (Rogerson, 1951), had, according to Richard Wiseman (1676), his predecessor in the second half of the 17th century. Apparently at that time the fear of syphilitic infection was widespread, but unlike today, there was then some justification for such a fear. Wiseman himself, for example, complained in his treatise on gonorrhoea that the treatment of venereal diseases "is the most employment of our profession, the diseases of these parts being most frequently gotten by the most predominant vice of the age".

Wiseman, after describing the "Degrees and Symptoms" of the lues venerea, says:

"These dreadful Symptoms have frequently possess the imaginations of some people, who having taken the way to get the Pox are soon persuaded that they have it. These men will strangely imagine all the pains and other Symptoms they have read of, or have heard other men talk of. Many of these hypochondriack have come to Sir Frac Pr.†, in which case he hath been pleased to send for me to consider of their complaints with him. They commonly went away from us unsatisfied, nor could they quiet their minds till they found some undertake that would comply with them; which done they were never the better, the imagination in which the Disease was seated remaining still uncured; whereupon presuming they were not in hands skilful enough, they have gone to others and so forwards, till they had ruined both their Bodies and Purses.

"There have been three of these people with me lately; one a Tradesman, who told me that since his Wifes death he hath fallen into ill company, and being heated with drink, strayed and got a Clap, for which he had been under several hands; that it had cost him 40 pounds amongst them, but he was still worse and worse. I asked him if he had ever a Gonorrhoea? Yea, said he, with great pain in my Back, which still continues; also such a pain in my Nose, that I fear it will fall. Upon more particular enquiry I found no such thing; only upon straining to make Urine or upon the Close-stool he had an involuntary effusion of Seed, which was an old infirmity he had quite forgot. I endeavoured to

satisfy him that he escaped better than he deserved. Whether he continues in the same opinion he seemed to have received from me of his condition I sometimes Doubted, but lately have seen him and been assured, that since he spake with me he had taken no Physick, nor felt any cause for it, he continuing very well."

The question whether the man had ever had gonorrhoea needs some explanation. Wiseman, like all his contemporaries,* believed that syphilis and gonorrhoea were one and the same disease and that they differed only "in Degree". Of the diagnosis "gonorrhoea" itself, he shared the belief that "in general it may signifie any flux of Seed from the Body", but he added that "The Moderns have given a larger account of Gonorrhoea; and do find many difficulties of it". He distinguished between three different causes of gonorrhoea, namely,

- (a) from fault of the vessels,
- (b) from a fault in the matter of the Seed,
- (c) infected with a virulency in the Lues Venerea.

It was the last form of gonorrhoea which he diagnosed as "one of the first Symptoms of Lues Venerea". It is important to note that Wiseman regarded a "virulent gonorrhoea" only as "one of the first symptoms" of syphilis. Being an excellent clinician, he was fully aware that the existing theory did not always fit the facts, and that syphilis could occur without a preceding gonorrhoea. He stated that "sometimes a Gonorrhoea succeeds not—where none of the other symptoms have preceded, a small chancrous Ulcer ariseth between the Prepuce and the glans, above or below, on one side, or in the entrance of the Urethra . . .".

Wiseman's patient was suffering from "gonorrhoea", but it was a form which was usually

* The humoral pathologists of the 17th century were fully justified in their unitarian view with regard to the venereal diseases. A venereal distemper was caused by the disturbance of the humours proceeding from a "venomous cause" (Salmon, 1699) or a "venomous contagion" (Wiseman, 1676); it was a "Dyscrasia of all the humors in the Body, consisting in a volatile corrosive Acidity" (Salmon, 1699). However different the symptoms of this type of disturbance of the humours were, they had all to be regarded as symptoms of one disease being caused by the same venom or contagion. In a similar way, widely different diseases are nowadays grouped together on their aetiological basis, e.g. the allergic, the psychosomatic, and the stress diseases.

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† Sir Francis Prujean (1593–1666), Physician in London, President of the College of Physicians, 1650–1654. Dictionary of National Biography.

described as a "simple gonorrhoea". In contrast to it was the "virulent, malignant, or venereal" form of gonorrhoea, a form in which "the white matter turns yellowish and virulent . . . as is contracted in the French Pox" (Salmon, 1686).

Trying to assess the prevalence of venereal disease in former times is always a difficult and hazardous undertaking because the contemporary documents, medical and otherwise, have as a rule the tendency to exaggerate. Wiseman's remarks on syphilophobia are therefore of interest because they leave no doubt that in his time a considerable number of persons were treated for a venereal disease who were in reality suffering from something else. The causes which contributed to this fact were the then existing concept of venereal disease, the difficulties of diagnosis (though these were well understood by

some at least*), the fear of infection among lay people, and an unscrupulous attitude of some members of the medical profession, empirics and quacks included.

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* The difficulties which sometimes arose in the differential diagnosis between the French Pox and the King's Evil had already been pointed out in the 16th century by Boorde (1542) and by Clowes (1591); in the 17th century they were again stressed by Browne (1684) and by Wiseman.