

# News, Notes and Queries

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## AN IRISH DOCTOR IN THE CHOLERA EPIDEMIC OF THE 1830s

I HAVE lately come into possession of some old letters written by and to my great grandfather, Dr. Charles Neilson, who was in practice in the west of Ireland during the cholera epidemic in the 1830s. I have his diploma as a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland dated 23 November 1824, and I believe that he remained in the same practice in County Mayo from that time until his death in 1871.

In 1832 his father, who was a doctor in Dundalk, contracted cholera, and he went to visit him. A letter to his wife, dated 30 May 1832, says that his father is very seriously ill.

It is necessary to give him wine and other cordials in considerable quantity to support his strength, which is very much exhausted. . . . Cholera is raging terribly in Drogheda. There have been six cases in this town (Dundalk) and neighbourhood, all fatal, but they all I understand brought the disease from Drogheda or some other infected place.

A letter from his half-sister to his wife, written from Drogheda three weeks later (on 18 June 1832), speaks of the anxiety she had felt at his intention to visit the cholera hospital before he left Dundalk.

I am happy [she says] to find he has escaped the danger; it appears the disease has increased in severity in several places where it had considerably abated; in Newry and its neighbourhood it has caused great mortality. A few nights ago we were surprised by a large assemblage of people, men, women and children, on the street in the middle of the night. Then rappings at our door induced Joseph [her youngest brother] to open his window and look out; as they were just leaving the door he did not speak, and he saw them rap at a number of doors in the street. In the morning we were informed that they were fugitives flying from Cholera, and leaving stones at the different houses as a charm against it.

It seems that Charles Neilson may have written notes on his treatment of cholera in a medical paper of the period, for in September 1849 he wrote a letter, of which he kept a copy, to some unspecified correspondent. Beginning simply 'My dear Sir', it goes on to point out some apparent misapprehensions in a letter to which this is the reply.

I did not say or imagine [he says] that ague and Cholera were similar diseases. But I said there appeared to be the different stages in Cholera as well as in fever and that Dickson's Chronothermic theory of disease might be applied to it. . . . I compared what is called Cholera to the cold stage of fever, while the consecutive fever and the perspiration which I think in greater or less degree always precedes recovery or perhaps death may be compared to the hot and sweating stages of fever.

I have repeatedly seen the most beneficial effects from an anodyne, for instance Dover's powder, *after* the use of the lancet or a smart purgative, perhaps both, in checking febrile action, by calming the nervous system, being often followed by free perspiration & preventing the disease becoming confirmed fever. I expressed my opinion with respect to the employment of opium in the *advancing* state of fever, by that I meant the middle period when febrile action

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is proceeding to or near its height. I said nothing against its use in the far advanced state, as I am perfectly aware of the benefit which is then often derived from it—I may here remark with respect to the use of Calomel in the latter period of fever that I have in different instances, when the patient was in a state of stupor and seemingly quite insensible after the 19th day of fever when I apprehended that effusion on the brain would probably ensue, given two grains of Calomel every 2nd or 3rd hour with the most decided benefit, putting it dry into the mouth & giving some fluid afterwards to carry it into the stomach.

To return now to Cholera, I strongly imagine that the mercurial plan of treatment did not get a fair trial in Ballina when it was so completely condemned. In the first place there is a very material difference between the mercurial liniment of the Dispensary & the turpentine mercurial liniment I recommended, and I know from experience that their effects are very different. I was very much gratified to see in the *Dublin Medical Press* for 5th September a review of a work by Dr. Shapter of Exeter on Cholera, in which he speaks of the good effects of almost the same mode of treatment I proposed. I shall quote a sentence or two. 'Mercury, freely used, both *externally* and internally, was attended with the greatest advantage; nor does its administration in large doses, though frequently repeated, appear to have been followed by any evil results.' Again, speaking of Collapse, 'should this however have set in, superadded to the above the stimulating applications were frequently and repeatedly applied to the limbs together with *frictions of Mercurial ointment in combination with the spirits of Turpentine.*'

I think it is better not to wait for collapse, but on the very first appearance of cramp have recourse to mercurial friction. There is not to my mind the danger you dread from mercury to be apprehended still. I have seen sore mouths produced in only two instances, nor is the quantity employed very great. In many cases there were not more than 12 grains of Calomel given nor do I recollect any case except one in which there were more than 40. Very seldom indeed were more than 10 or 12 pills of 2 grains each given. . . . Calomel appears to me not to act as a purgative, its effects seem to me to be sedative, as both the Purging and vomiting are materially checked, without any astringents which I am convinced will in the majority of cases in the advanced stage do harm.

To us today the doses of calomel appear heroic, but after all we have here a doctor who was writing from considerable experience, and one moreover whose views corresponded with those of other authorities of the period.

Photographs show him—a dogged looking figure—standing or sitting, dressed in heavy tweed jacket and trousers, beside a table on which reposes his tall hat. He looks a man who would brook no interference with his opinions; and it is interesting to read, in a letter from his grandfather, written in 1817, when Charles was acting as tutor in a noble family to earn fees for his medical studies:

There is another point on which you have much need of admonition, a rock on which you have already split, that is, a taste for contradiction and argument. Whoever indulges this taste will surely be disgusting, and never win friends.

It was possibly this very argumentativeness and doggedness which helped him to work out and apply his own methods in disease, and to do such notable service in the cholera epidemic, not only as family doctor but also as secretary of the Famine Relief Fund, that his name is still remembered by various families in the district more than a hundred years later.

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