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Give Me Gout or Give Me Death: The Rise of Gout in the Eighteenth Century

by

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Abstract

The 18th century was "a great time" to have gout. Although gout and its link to overindulgence had been described over four thousand years prior, it still permeated the minds and joints of important individuals in society and was seen as a desirable condition to have. In light of deadly diseases such as the plague, palsy and apoplexy afflicting the common people, a condition that did not kill such as gout was viewed as having a protective effect against death. The presence of gout was perceived as trumping physician-delivered medicine, leading some prominent public figures to offer monetary rewards to those who could help them obtain gout. With increased access to the luxuries promoting gout, it was no longer the "disease of kings," spreading to upper-class writers, artists and politicians, shaping 18th century literature, artwork and politics. Because many authors were afflicted, from personal experience it found its way into many well-known novels such as Jonathan Swift's (1667-1745) *Gulliver's Travels* and Tobias Smollett's (1721-1771) *Humphrey Clinker*, and was criticized for not showing up more prominently in the novels of Jane Austen (1775-1817) and Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832). The 18th century was the first time gout was prominently featured in artwork, mostly as political satire mocking the upper class. Gout has also been argued to play a pivotal role in Western political history such as the Boston Tea Party and signing of the American Constitution, afflicting prominent individuals including Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) and Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826). With no reliable treatment for gout, inventors and entrepreneurs were motivated to devise new and often unsuccessful treatment and management strategies. It is the intent of this presentation to highlight the tremendous interest in gout during the 18th century, and explore what gout can teach us of the sociopolitical events of the time.

Introduction

By the 18th century, gout had long been described and established as a disease process. Gout was first identified by the Egyptians in 2640 BC, often attributed to the great Egyptian physician Imhotep. Its discovery was first documented in the Ebers and Edwin Smith Papyri, written one thousand years earlier (Schwartz, 2006). Having studied at the temple of Imhotep around 460-357 BC, Hippocrates also changed medicine's understanding of gout by differentiating gout (termed as *podagra* if it afflicted the feet, most notably the first metatarsophalangeal joint, and *gonagra* if it afflicted the knees) from a generalized joint disorder called *arthritis*. Each of these entities was thought to be caused by the descent, accumulation, and congestion of body fluid (in those days known as humours) into the joints (Schwartz, 2006; Porter and Rousseau, 1998). Hippocrates also identified epidemiological factors of the disease, describing gout as affecting mostly men, with Hippocratic Aphorism VI-29 describing that "*a woman does not take the gout unless her menses be stopped,*" both details that stand true today

(Hippocrates [Adams ed.], 1886). A link between gout and genetics has been noted as early as 129-200 AD by Greek physician Galen who noticed that gout was often passed down the lineage of prominent individuals in society, so it was a mark of a good pedigree in addition to being wealthy enough to afford life's luxuries (Porter and Rousseau, 1998). The term "gout" was not coined until the 13th century, where a Dominican monk named Randolphus of Bocking (1197-1258) used the term, derived from the Latin word *gutta*, meaning "drop", in reference to the humoral theory. Hippocrates also made note of the link between gout and an intemperate lifestyle, calling podagra an "arthritis of the rich", a characterization of gout that remains with us today (Nuki and Simkin, 2006).

The 18th century was not a significant time of medical advancement with respect to the perception or treatment of gout. Why, then, is it referred to as the golden age of gout? This paper explores the answer to this question through public perception of gout and anecdotes from prominent authors, artists and politicians in society, showing that the 18th century was a great time to have gout.

Eighteenth Century Social Perceptions of Gout

Consistent with earlier lifestyle and genetic links, having gout implied a high social status and a position of distinction, which were inherited in those days. Because of the lack of advancement in characterization and management of the disease, it is a rare time in the history of medicine where a disease was defined its by social context, at its peak in the 18th century. Prevalence of gout was certainly higher than past centuries among the upper class, as protein-rich diets and indulgent habits that triggered attacks of gout became increasingly available. In particular, Britain's 1703 Methuen Treaty with Portugal ensured a steady flow of fortified wines linked with an increased incidence in gout. Moreover, the inclusion of lead in wine casks or in fortification products in wine caused symptoms of irregular visceral gout (Porter and Rousseau, 1998). Another theory of gout's high prevalence describes physicians giving diagnoses of gout to mask their ignorance, similar to the diagnosis of hysteria in the 19th century (Porter and Rousseau, 1998). Gout's controversial links to an assumed high intelligence and increased sexual promiscuity persisted in perceptions of physicians and the public in the absence of any medical basis. The link is not surprising, given that rich and powerful men were well-fed, well-educated and often used their power to lure many women (Schwartz, 2006). Interestingly, gout's link to coitus was first noticed by Hippocrates, who in his aphorisms noted that "*A youth does not get gout before sexual intercourse*" (Hippocrates [Adams ed.], 1886).

Even though the associations between gout and excessive lifestyle were well-known by most members of society, individuals did not exactly try to temper their superfluous behaviours to avoid gout. In fact, gout was often seen as a desirable affliction to have. Gout, a disease that did not kill, was seen as having a protective effect against diseases that did, such as the plague, palsy (paralysis) or apoplexy (stroke), thus prolonging life. Early in the century, Gilbert Sheldon (1598-1677), Archbishop of Canterbury under Charles II (1630-1685), offered £1000 (now valued at over $300,000 CAD) to the person who would "*help him to gout*" as he thought that it would protect his health (Schwartz, 2006, Bank of England, 2008). In 1783, fourth earl of Orford, Horace Walpole (1717-1797), described his affliction of gout as a type of health insurance, writing, "*The gout, they tell me, is to ensure me a length of years and health, but as I fear I must now and then renew the patent at the original expense, I am not much flattered by so dear an*

annuity" (Walpole [Lewis ed.], 1977). Thomas Jefferson, a gout sufferer himself, described a positive outlook after a period of worry when a friend fell ill, "*He is very seriously ill. Nature seems struggling to decide his disease into a gout. A swelled foot, at present, gives us a hope of this issue*" (Boyd, 1966).

Gout in 18th Century Literature and Beyond

With authors belonging to a higher social status than in years past, many of them were privy to the luxuries that predisposed to gout. As a result, gout found its way into the joints of prominent authors and characters in their novels. Gout was mentioned in prominent English satirical author Jonathan Swift's masterpiece *Gulliver's Travels* where gout is associated with high priesthood (Swift, 2003). In his 1726 poem "Bec's Birth-Day," he describes an illness in Bec, a 40-year old woman "*overrun with care, Continues healthy, fat, and fair*" (Swift, 1726), He goes on to describe an illness with which she is afflicted:

> *As, if the gout should seize the head,*
> *Doctors pronounce the patient dead;*
> *But, if they can, by all their arts,*
> *Eject it to the extremest parts,*
> *They give the sick many joy, and praise*
> *The gout that will prolong his days.*

Gout also appears in novels by prominent 18th century authors Daniel Defoe (c. 1660-1731), Sir Walter Scott and novelist-physician Tobias Smollett (1721-1771) (Schwartz, 2006). As a physician affected with gout, Smollett was constantly worried that his asthma and lung disease were more severe manifestations of gout. In particular, Smollett's 1771 novel *The Adventures of Humphrey Clinker*, features a protagonist with gout, and is the last novel in any language with the "gouty old man" as a hero. Social commentary of gout is a central theme in the novel: those born into wealth pay for it. Some historians even criticize authors like Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott for not including gout more prominently in their tales of the upper class, as it never showed up in any of Austen's main characters, nor Scott's historical novel depicting the Peninsular wars between 1809 and 1812, which would be easily anticipated in both social classes and time periods depicted (Porter and Rousseau, 1998).

Gout as Social Commentary in Art

The 18th century was the first time gout became featured in artwork. Even though portraiture had been popular in the past, there was a lack of depictions of gout, as elderly gouty males, usually fat and immobile with bandages around their feet, did not want to be "*remembered as a septuagenarian freak of Falstaffian glob*" (Porter and Rousseau, 1998). This changed in the 18th century, as gout was used as fodder for artwork depicting social commentary, often as a mockery.

As a disease defined by its social context, gout was a prominent subject in the works of English artists William Hogarth (1697-1764) and Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1826). These artists, known for using their art as a means for political satire, painted pictures of old wealthy men in their lavish environments confined to a chair as a result of an attack of gout, leering at young women (Porter and Rousseau, 1998). One famous drawing by

Rowlandson titled "*The Old Husband*" (Figure 1) depicts an elderly man in his upper-class bedroom, so immobilized and drunk while sitting on his chair, that he cannot see his wife having an affair with a more limber military man in their bed behind him. Framed paintings on the walls nod to the lineage associated with gout (Gatrell, 2006). Perhaps more subtly, Hogarth's prints took aim at the conceit in families associated with gout. His 1745 painting titled "*Marriage à la Mode: 1. The Marriage Settle*ment" (Figure 2) depicts the recurring concept of the gouty father, the character that stands out most, surrounded by his family. In the luxurious sitting room, he is perched atop the largest chair, resting his foot on a gout stool and flanked with canes, status symbols associated with luxury and gout (Tate Britain, 2007). Later, gout stools and canes became a visual cue for comedy. Laurence Sterne's (1713-1768) 1760 comic mega-novel Tristam Shandy was illustrated by Hogarth, who depicted gouty men beating commoners with their canes (Porter and Rousseau, 1998).

The most prominent work of art depicting gout undisputedly belongs to London artist James Gillray (1757-1815), who suffered from gout himself. His 1799 painting entitled "*The Gout*" depicts the pain associated with gout, represented by the devil biting into the side of a man's gouty foot (Figure 3). True to social context of the time, it was depicted satirically as both grotesque and grand, laughing at the misery of privilege (Lubbock, 2005).

Gout's Role in the American Revolution

It is no surprise that many prominent American political leaders in the 18th century were afflicted with gout. However, few realize the role that gout may have played to shape American history, including prominent events such as the Boston Tea Party in 1773, Declaration of Independence in 1776, 1783's Treaty of Paris, the American Constitution in 1787 and its first Ten Amendments, as well as the Bill of Rights in 1789. Prominent politicians Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Charles Gravier, the Comte de Vergennes (1717-1787), a French nobleman instrumental in securing money to finance the revolution, were all sufferers; this commonality has been postulated to have strengthened their working relationship (Nuki and Simkin, 2006). George Mason (1725-1792), known as the father of the Bill of Rights, often suffered from attacks of gout, which limited his involvement during certain aspects of the revolution (Schwartz, 2006).

A notorious drinker who once wrote "*God clearly intended us to be tipplers because he had made the joints of the arm just the right length to carry a glass to the mouth,*" Benjamin Franklin, in particular, was carried by convicts through Philadelphia en route to signing the Constitution, as his gout did not let him ambulate efficiently (Clark, 1983). The multitalented Franklin was also known as a published author, often writing about things central to his life such as gout. In his 1780 essay "Dialogue between Franklin and the Gout," he personified Gout in his play as a character quick to taunt Franklin's suffering with gout (Franklin qtd. after: Smyth ed., 1970). It starts:

> *FRANKLIN: Eh! Oh! eh! What have I done to merit these cruel sufferings?*
> *GOUT: Many things; you have ate and drank too freely, and too much indulged those legs of yours in their indolence.*

Gout goes on to detail a typical day of Franklin's, specifically pointing out key deficiencies in his routine, "*But what is your practice after dinner? Walking in the beautiful gardens of those friends with whom you have dined would be the choice of men of sense; yours is to be fixed down to chess, where you are found engaged for two or three hours*!" Gout then goes on to explain why it exists and how these attacks of gout are helpful to the body:

> […] *instead of accelerating the motion of the fluids, the rigid attention it requires helps to retard the circulation and obstruct internal secretions. Wrapt in the speculations of this wretched game, you destroy your constitution. What can be expected from such a course of living, but a body replete with stagnant humors, ready to fall prey to all kinds of dangerous maladies, if I, the Gout, did not occasionally bring you relief by agitating those humors, and so purifying or dissipating them*?

Most interestingly, Gout ends the play reminding Franklin that he (Gout) acts as a physician, a sentiment shared by the 18th century public:

> *GOUT. Well, then, to my office; it should not be forgotten that I am your physician. There.*
> *FRANKLIN. Ohhh! what a devil of a physician!*
> *GOUT. How ungrateful you are to say so! Is it not I who, in the character of your physician, have saved you from the palsy, dropsy, and apoplexy? one or other of which would have done for you long ago, but for me*.

Gout may also have been used as a convenient excuse for political tactics. Massachusetts' revolutionary leader John Hancock (1737-1793) has been accused of being at the centre of one of these tactics. In January 1788, the constitution was ratified by only five of nine required states. Hancock, as Governor of Massachusetts, was said to be unable to decide which way to vote and retreated to bed with a conveniently placed attack of gout. Later, after the Federalists tempted Hancock with an offer of Vice Presidency, his gout miraculously cured and he was able to vote, helping to ratify the Constitution by a small margin (Nuki and Simkin, 2006).

Gout has also negatively affected historical outcomes, playing a role in Britain's losing of American colonies. British statesman William Pitt the Elder (1708-1778) was absent from the 1765 session whereby British parliament voted to tax the American colonies (despite lack of American representation in British parliament), since the British were defending the colonies against French attack. After he recovered from this episode, Pitt led a motion to successfully repeal this act. However, in a 1773 session when Pitt was again absent due to gout, the British parliament voted to heavily tax imports of tea from the American colonies without levying taxes on other tea imports. This decision was the precipitating factor for the Boston Tea Party, and helped to spark the American Revolution (Copeman, 1964).

Innovation in Treatment and Management of Gout

Part of the reason for gout's frenzy in the 18th century is that gout had been a well-established disease for a long time, yet good management was still elusive. This fact, coupled with the high social class and wealth that gout affected, afforded innovations and inventions in its management and treatment. A key innovation in gout's management is that of comfortable seating that will ease the pain of gout and transportation that will increase an afflicted's mobility. Until then, the furniture in public locations was not designed for comfort, as it functioned to promote a refined and dignified upright posture in those who sat there, especially as they wore cumbersome and uncomfortable wigs and layers of structured clothing (Porter and Rousseau, 1998). Spain's King Philip II (1527-1598), the only known inventor king, afflicted with gout himself, designed many of these chairs. Staying home during an attack, he would recline on an "easy chair," described as "*a sort of couch, with movable positions from vertical to horizontal, seven feet long and two and a half feet wide, with a horsehair mattress. The king sat, ate, and slept in it, wearing loose garments that did not put pressure on his arthritic joints,*" perhaps an early inspiration of the American TV room staple, the LaZ-Boy (Schwartz, 2006). These often were located in the bedroom, and thus there was a shift to the bedroom as a social and public place for those afflicted with gout. He also created "sedan chairs" for the purposes of transportation where he could sit and be carried by several men, and "gout chairs," a comfortable recliner on wheels, for the purpose of commercial transport. The gout chairs gained popularity throughout Europe, constructed *en masse*, and were documented by Benjamin Franklin by the early 1700s. These are often seen as the earliest wheelchairs (Schwartz, 2006). The furniture industry of easy chairs and gout chairs flourished through the 20th century until more effective treatments for gout were discovered.

Medical treatment in the 18th century was controversial. A common but controversial treatment was used since the 6th century BC, when physician Alexander of Tralles (c. 525-c.605) prescribed a preparation of autumn crocus called hermodactyl. Its active medical ingredient was colchicum, similar to today's colchicine, a current medication indicated for gout (not first line treatment), scleroderma and secondary amyloidosis (Copeman, 1964). Originally, hermodactyl was widely lauded for its effective treatment and widely prescribed by physicians, but upon discovering the severe gastrointestinal upset as well as potential for colchicine poisoning causing kidney failure and respiratory death, hermodactyl treatment ceased in popularity and fell out of favour from the 1600s until 1770. Later, Nicolas Husson (1814-1890), a French army officer, reintroduced a secret formula which included colchicum. Sales were successful, but its link to colchicum was controversial and its sale outlawed 8 years later due to the dangerous side effects. Still, Husson's formula was said to have been sold on the black market (Porter and Rousseau, 1998).

Since the disease process was not well-known, many other medical and lifestyle treatments were attempted. A widely held belief was not to tamper with gout because of its protective health effects. Dr. William Cadogan (1711-1797) from Bristol, in his controversial publication "Dissertation on the Gout," was one of the first to strongly advocate for exercise and moderation of excessive lifestyle as treatment of gout. Although this concept had been suggested in the past, the upper class were insulted and shocked by the fact that Cadogan not only denounced the genetic component of gout which they held in high regard because of their lineages, but also fervently challenged "*ancestral gracious living and the civilized arts of cuisine and cellar*" (ibidem, 1998).

Other documented treatments of the time included mercury preparations, outlined by an influential Scottish doctor of the time. Cold or hot water bathing and mineral water therapies, notably in the thermal waters of Bath, were an accepted treatment for gout since the Middle Ages, but the commercialization of spas took off in the 18th century. These spas also had physicians who advocated for moderation of diet and regular exercise. The Industrial Revolution made its presence known, manufacturing hot baths, stream jets and saunas (Copeman, 1964). Popular magazines of the time would have regular sections devoted to individuals who had been cleared of gout using idiosyncratic methods. These ranged from burning moss and garlic, boiled horse dung applied to the affected skin's surface, and drinking a concoction of human bones and viper's flesh. With the disease affecting the upper class, there was significant money to be made, especially in the 'quacks' who aggressively marketed treatments of questionable value. One notable quack was Will Atkins who reportedly made a fortune with sales of his anodyne necklaces and bracelets (Copeman, 1964).

Conclusion

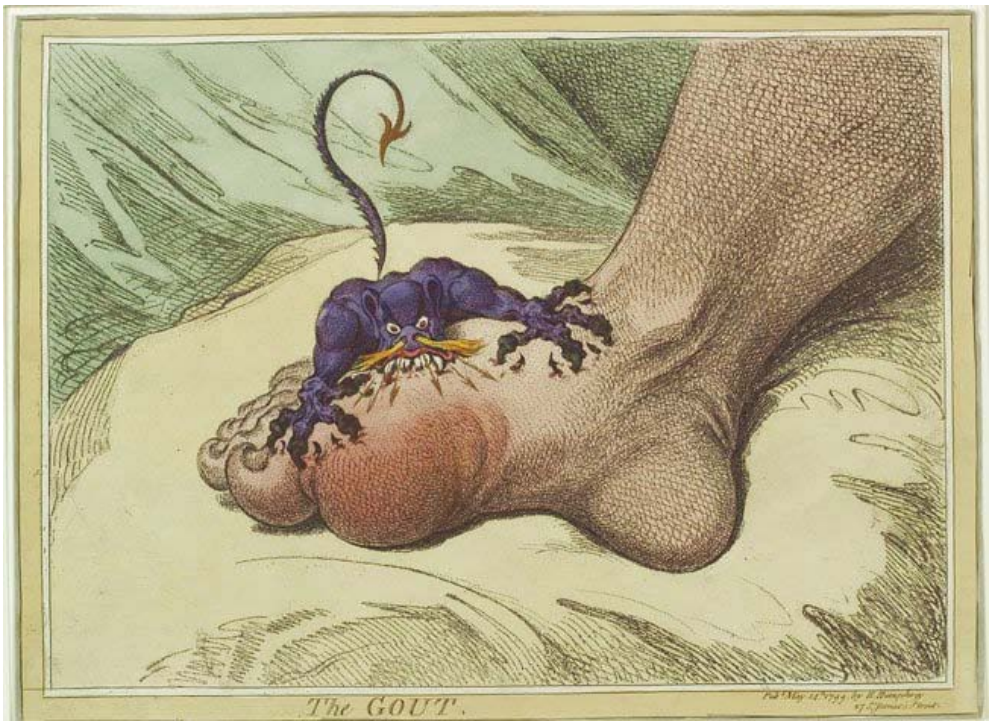
The lack of a solid medical understanding and management strategies for gout allowed gout to reach its heyday in the 18th century. With increased access to luxuries associated with gout, it no longer was "the disease of kings," spreading to upper-class writers, artists and politicians and influencing literature, art and politics. With lack of a management strategy for gout, this led innovators and imposters to acquire wealth developing solutions.

Appendix

Figure 1: Thomas Rowlandson, "*The Old Husband*". 1800. (Source: Gatrell, 2006)

Figure 2: William Hogarth, "*The Marriage Settlement*". 1945. (Source: Tate Britain, 2006)

Figure 3: James Gillray, "*The Gout*". 1799. (Source: Porter and Rousseau, 1998)



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