

Copy of a letter from Mr. Charles Cameron, a surgeon in His Majesty's Navy and late surgeon of the Fergusson convict ship, to the Commissioners for victualling His Majesty's Navy, and for the care of sick and wounded seamen.

Contributors

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C O P Y

OF A

L E T T E R

FROM

MR. CHARLES CAMERON,

A

SURGEON IN HIS MAJESTY'S NAVY,

AND LATE

SURGEON OF THE FERGUSSON CONVICT SHIP,

TO THE

C O M M I S S I O N E R S

FOR

VICTUALLING HIS MAJESTY'S NAVY,

AND FOR THE

CARE OF SICK AND WOUNDED SEAMEN.

EGT

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

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COPY
OF
A LETTER,
&c.

3, *Lyon's Inn*, London,
December 10th, 1829.

GENTLEMEN,

I BEG leave to lay before your Honourable Board the following short report of the sickness which occurred on board the *Fergusson*, convict-ship, during the passage from Ireland to New South Wales, with the view of submitting to your notice and consideration, the means which were adopted for the cure of the disease.

The *Fergusson* sailed from Ireland on the 16th of November last year, with two hundred and sixteen male prisoners. When they came on board, they were generally in a low state of health—such as would arise from deficient nourishment,—and on proceeding to sea, bad weather, and much sea-sickness, affected them to such a degree for the first two or three weeks, that most of them could take but little nourishment. From the debilitated state of the system thus induced,

symptoms of scurvy began to appear very generally; and before we passed the Equator the disease had assumed so formidable a character, that the hospital was full, and several persons in the prison were confined to bed, many of them evidently in a very dangerous state; others, though still able to walk about, were affected; and the daily additions to the sick-list were so numerous, notwithstanding the assiduous application of the usual means, that I had much reason to apprehend the disease was encreasing. So various, however, were its symptoms, and in many cases the usual appearances of scurvy were so obscure, that I confess I could not then convince myself that those symptoms were wholly derived from a scorbutic habit. At this period of the voyage two men died. The most prominent feature of their complaint was dysentery, attended with considerable febrile excitement; and though, in these cases, few external symptoms of scurvy existed sufficiently marked to attract attention, yet the *post mortem* examination of one of them shewed clearly the nature of the disease—dysentery supervening on the scorbutic diathesis.

The disease thus prevailing amongst the prisoners being modified, and, no doubt, aggravated, by the hot weather, for about three weeks in crossing the Equator, I thought it would be highly

imprudent to proceed further than Rio Janeiro, until their health had been recruited by such refreshments as their condition might render necessary; and arrangements were accordingly made for that purpose. Such, however, was the state of many of my patients at the time, that I had every reason, not only to fear that I should lose several of them before we could reach the port, but that others were fast approaching the same appalling condition.

Having on several former occasions experienced the excellent effects of a "solution of nitre," as recommended by Paterson, in the cure of scurvy, some years ago, I was anxious to employ it for the cure of the disease, but had so small a quantity on board that I despaired of deriving any benefit from it. Immediately after the death of the second prisoner, it occurred to me that I could extract nitre from gunpowder, of which, I knew, there was a sufficient quantity on board. I succeeded easily, and from the moment I commenced the use of it as a medicine, the patients, although many of them were almost hopeless cases, began to improve rapidly; and my mind was relieved from a sense of responsibility which was becoming more and more awful. Although at this time we had not accomplished one-third of our voyage, yet I found that the health of the sick im-

proved so fast under the new treatment, and that the solution of nitre had such a powerful control over the disease, that I did not consider it necessary to go into any port; and on our arrival at Sydney, notwithstanding I had at one time nearly seventy scorbutic patients on the list, the general health of the prisoners was much better than when they were embarked in Ireland; and it was particularly remarked, on landing, that their appearance was more healthy than was usually the case. I am willing to ascribe much of this favourable change to the effects of climate, but I feel assured, that a solution of nitre in vinegar or lime-juice is the best remedy ever proposed in the treatment of scurvy, where a diet consisting partly of recent vegetable matter cannot be procured. I am, therefore, desirous to see it restored to (or at least obtain) that rank as a medicinal agent, in this affection, which I have every reason to believe it deserves.

For the purposes of practice I would rather consider sea-scurvy (which is, however, common enough on shore) a peculiar diathesis than a disease, and would define it "a depraved habit of body, arising from improper diet, whether on board of ship or on shore." It certainly does occasionally pursue something like a regular course; but in general, during its earlier stages,

the patients are attacked with various other diseases, not essential to the existence of the scorbutic diathesis. One of those diseases soon becomes the most prominent feature of the case, and the scorbutic habit of the system is frequently not suspected; which, if not the cause of, at least, exerts the most baneful influence over such disease. For this reason the insidious manner in which scurvy makes its encroachments, the variety of forms it may assume, and the liability of the scorbutic symptoms to be overlooked, are points highly deserving the attention of the surgeon on long voyages.

Among the diseases to which persons of a scorbutic habit of body are liable, I would instance various affections of the lungs, dysentery, diarrhoea, &c. Interstitial suffusion and ecchymosis take place in the internal organs, as well as externally, and the onus of the disease will probably fall on the weaker parts; and when it is recollected that the tendency to ulceration, in this affection, is such that old cicatrices break out into open ulcers, it will be evident that ulceration, for instance of the rectum in a case of dysentery, or of the lungs in bronchitis, can scarcely be treated with any prospect of success, until the scorbutic habit is corrected. On this principle I would explain the occasional fatality of endemic fevers, dysentery,

and other diseases called malignant and putrid, which sometimes rage amongst the poor, and in jails, hospitals, ships, camps, &c., &c.

The forms which the disease assumed on board the *Fergusson* were so various, that my limits will not permit a description of them ; but I would remark that its general character corresponded with that so ably described by Dr. Latham, in his excellent account of the disease of the General Penitentiary at Milbank in 1823-4. In the *Fergusson*, however, the tendency to pulmonary affections was more prevalent, probably from the effects of climate ; yet I have understood, since my return to England, that of late consumption has been frequent amongst the inmates of the Penitentiary. In this form of the disease, whether it appeared as bronchitis, pleuritis, or pneumonia, the progress toward purulent secretion, and hepatization of the organ, was evident, and rapid ; and in stating that two of my patients, at the time I commenced the use of the nitrate of potass, had copious purulent expectoration, combined with other symptoms of the last stages of phthisis, and afterwards had a perfect recovery, I would not venture to affirm it, had not Assistant-Surgeon Russell of the 63d regiment, who went out passenger in the ship, repeatedly examined the matter expectorated, with me, and been equally well satisfied with myself that it con-

tained a large proportion of pus. From these and many other similar cases, which have come under my observation, I am convinced that there is a more intimate connexion between many, if not most, cases of phthisis pulmonalis, and a scorbutic habit of the system, than is generally supposed : and I am also satisfied, that consumption would be frequently prevented, if not totally removed, before suppuration has made much progress, by correcting the general bad habit of the constitution.

I beg, however, to observe, that although I have used this remedy more extensively, and with the most decided advantage in every case, I have no wish to represent it in more favourable terms than Mr. Paterson has done, as far as he describes its effects in his *Treatise on Scurvy* ; but so far as the cases of our patients corresponded, (for I have seen few cases with hardness and rigidity of the extremities,) I certainly do not think his statement overcharged. I would, therefore, beg leave to refer to his treatise on this subject. But I might add that the most distressing symptoms which my patients complained of, in the early stages, namely, a sense of “oppression and sinking at the pit of the stomach,” were almost invariably relieved, or totally removed, by a few doses of the medicine. The prisoners themselves were so sensible of its good effects, that I had for the first time an oppor-

tunity of seeing men crave for medicine, the taste of which was certainly not pleasant; and their complexions were so much improved under its use—changing from a sallow, bloated hue, sometimes approaching to livid, to a clear, healthy colour—that it became matter of surprise to every one.

The medicine was prepared, and exhibited in the following manner:—Eight ounces of nitre were dissolved in so much vinegar as would make the solution amount to sixty-four ounces. Sometimes equal parts of vinegar and lime-juice were used. A little sugar was generally added to render it more palatable; and about four drops of *ol. menth. piperitæ*, diffused in a small portion of alcohol, was added to the whole, which rendered it more grateful to the stomach.

One ounce of this solution was the dose, and was seldom exceeded. From three, to eight doses, according to the stage of the disease and the severity of the symptoms, were given at equal intervals during the day—from six o'clock in the morning till eight at night. In general, when the disease was taken early, two or three doses a-day, for a week or ten days, were sufficient; but it appeared to me to be always better to commence with three or four doses, and increase the number gradually—daily if necessary. In the advanced stages a much larger quantity

may be taken, and is in fact required, than at the commencement of the disease; but although I have often given the solution to the extent of eight ounces daily, and on one or two occasions exceeded this quantity considerably, and have at the same time watched my patients very closely, I never observed any irritation of the stomach or bowels, or any other inconvenience which could be fairly attributed to it. It is, nevertheless, adviseable to dilute each dose with two or three ounces of water when exhibited. While the constitution is thus being corrected and improved, particular symptoms will require the usual attention.

It is perhaps proper to notice that, about two years ago, I had occasion to give a solution of nitre in water, a fair trial in several bad cases of scurvy, where neither vinegar nor lime-juice could be obtained; and except that sometimes it did not appear to me to sit so easy on the stomach, with the same good effects on the disease.

I am, very respectfully,

GENTLEMEN,

Your most obedient, humble Servant,

CHARLES CAMERON,

Surgeon, R.N.



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While the constitution is thus being corrected,
and long and regular purgations will continue
the usual attention to diet and regimen should be
observed. I have given this for about two
years ago. I had occasion to give a solution of
sulfate of iron, a fair trial in several bad cases of
anemia, where either zinc or iron alone would
be of little or no avail, and sometimes it did not
appear to do so. It is given in the stomach with
the same good effects on the system. I have
also I am very respectfully,
Yours most obediently,
CHARLES CAMPBELL,
M.D.









