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for Mr Macgibbon  
from the Author

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# OBSERVATIONS

ON THE

## TREATMENT OF SYPHILIS

WITHOUT MERCURY.

BY

JOHN THOMSON, M. D.

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AND SURGEON TO THE FORCES.

COMMUNICATED TO DR DUNCAN, JUNIOR.

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WITHOUT SURGERY

BY JOHN THOMPSON, M.D.

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THE GREAT BRITISH MEDICAL ASSOCIATION, LONDON.

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# OBSERVATIONS

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## *TREATMENT OF SYPHILIS*

WITHOUT MERCURY.

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**D**EAR SIR,—I regret that I have been prevented, by various avocations, from fulfilling my promise of giving you an account of the observations which, for a series of years, I have had occasion to make respecting the treatment of syphilis without mercury. But, if the following brief statement of the general results of these observations shall appear to you worthy of a place in your Journal, you will oblige me by inserting it.

I was led, many years ago, by a careful investigation into the history of syphilis, and by having had occasion to see a considerable number of anomalous and untractable cases, treated by full, but ineffectual courses of mercury, to doubt the justness of the opinion so generally received, that mercury, in some one or other of its forms, is the only safe, effectual, and specific remedy for the cure of that disease. These doubts were much increased by the discussions to which the various communications made to the late Dr Beddoes gave rise, respecting the efficacy of nitric acid in venereal complaints; by the appearance of Mr Abernethy's valuable publication on the diseases resembling syphilis; and by

conversations, at different times, with my friend Mr Pearson of the Lock Hospital, as well as by the perusal of notes taken from his excellent lectures upon that subject. In the uncertainty in which I was respecting the proper diagnostic marks of constitutional syphilis, I resolved, in the treatment of those cases that should come under my care, in which mercury had had a full trial, and particularly in which it seemed to have produced injurious effects, to abstain altogether from prescribing that remedy, till a trial should be made of some of the other remedies which had at different times acquired reputation for the cure of venereal complaints. That which I made choice of was the simple decoction of sarsaparilla; and, after a very ample employment of this substance, I feel myself compelled to adopt the opinions of some of the earlier writers on the venereal disease, with regard to the singular efficacy of this root in curing symptoms which have usually been reputed syphilitic; and also, with a few exceptions, to believe in the justness of the conclusions to which the late Sir William Fordyce had been led from an extensive trial of sarsaparilla. I have employed this remedy in every form of the disease, which either remains after, or succeeds to, the use of mercury, and have had the satisfaction to observe all manner of cutaneous eruptions and ulcerations, ulcerations of the throat, pains and swellings of the joints and ligaments, and nodes of the bones, gradually disappear under its mild operation, when its use was duly persisted in, and was, at the same time, accompanied by attention to regimen, and the proper local treatment. In particular cases, the recovery has been tedious, and it has been necessary to have recourse to the use of the sarsaparilla a second, or even a third time. I may however remark, that I have never had occasion to see the venereal diseases in which it was employed make those rapid and alarming advances which we see so often occur in them during the use of mercury, nor am I aware of any permanently injurious effects which the sarsaparilla produces, either immediately, or remotely, upon the constitution.

Various circumstances induce me to believe, that sarsaparilla has formed a principal ingredient in the composition of the greater number of the secret remedies which have been sold in every country of Europe for the cure of syphilis, and which have, I believe, been found chiefly useful in those cases in which that disease has appeared to remain in the constitution after the full and repeated use of mercury. I find the sarsaparilla mentioned as an ingredient in most of the antiveneal prescriptions of the irregular practitioners, and, in particular, in those of Sintelaer, the vender of a secret remedy for the cure of the vene-

real disease, who practised in London about the beginning of the last century, and who appears to me to have anticipated some of the observations and discoveries upon this subject which have been made in our times. In carrying on the observations to which I have alluded, it was with no small satisfaction that I accidentally found, about six years ago, the work of this practitioner, in the library of my friend, Dr Stedman of Kinross, entitled "The Scourge of Venus and Mercury, represented in a treatise of the venereal disease, giving a succinct, but most exact account of the nature, causes, signs, degrees, and symptoms of that dreadful distemper, and the fatal consequences arising from mercurial cures, with the several ways of taking that infection," &c. "Unto which is added, the true way of curing not only the consummate and inveterate, but also the *mercurial pox*, found to be more dangerous than the pox itself. The whole illustrated by many authentic and unquestionable accounts of cures performed after the patients were reduced to the very brink of the grave by mercurial operations, the like not as yet extant." By J. Sintelaer, practitioner in physic, London, 1709.

That I have not mistaken the nature, nor overrated the value of the hints contained in this book, and which tended to confirm me in the soundness of the conclusions to which I had been previously led regarding the treatment of venereal diseases without mercury, will appear, I trust, from the following extract, selected from among many passages of a similar import.

"When, after the imperfect or preposterous cure of a consummated pox, by mercurial salivations, or sometimes also by over violent, and too frequent mercurial vomitives, there appear such symptoms as are most commonly observed in the most inveterate or radicated pox, you may then rationally conclude, that they are not so much the remnants of the former pox, but rather *the symptoms of a disease of its own kind*, being occasioned either altogether by the natural malignity and virulency of the mercurial preparations, by which these salivations or violent vomitings were raised, or at least by the intermixture of the mercury with some small remnants of the pocky ferment, which otherwise might either have been expelled or subdued by the strength of nature; but its virulency being now exalted by the malignity of the mercury, it appears attended with much more violent, and much more dangerous symptoms after the mercurial cure, than it did before.

"Hence it is that a certain modern author is forced to confess, that he believes that there are more fallen noses, corroded palates, and rotten bones, occasioned by the mercury, than by the pox.

“So that if you observe, that after the cure of the pox by mercurial medicines, either some fresh pocky symptoms, such as did not appear before, but especially such as make their appearance in the glandulous and bony parts, as ulcers in the mouth and palate, or the roof of the mouth, and violent and continual pain in the bones; I say, if you find these symptoms appear after a cure of the pox by mercury, when nothing of it was observed before; or if you find these, and other such like symptoms which discovered themselves before the said cure, become afterward more violent and frequent, you may then be fully convinced, that they owe their origin chiefly to the malignity of the mercury, or at least to its intermixture with some slight remnants of the old pocky ferment, whence it is, that we have given it the name of a *mercurial* or *symptomatical* pox, called by some the *bastard pox*.”

In the want of an accurate diagnostic symptom between syphilitic chancre and ordinary ulceration, and often also from the situation of a patient, upon his first applying to me, rendering it improper for him to undergo a course of mercury, I had for many years frequently been induced to treat primary venereal sores with simple local remedies. The great number of these sores which disappeared under this treatment, some with, and others without, the formation of bubo, and many of them possessing all the characters usually attributed to syphilitic chancre, rendered me extremely desirous to ascertain whether there be indeed any primary venereal sores which are not capable of being healed without the use of mercury. An opportunity for bringing this matter to the test of public experiment, has been afforded me in the practice of the Consolidated Depôt Hospital in Edinburgh Castle, to the charge of which, through the kindness of the Director General of the Army Medical Department, I was appointed in March 1816. In this hospital, open to the inspection of all the medical military officers attending the University, I have, since that period, carefully abstained from the employment of mercury, not only in the treatment of secondary, but also in that of the primary symptoms of syphilis, and have found that chancre and bubo have in every instance disappeared under an antiphlogistic regimen, rest in the horizontal position, and mild local applications, as speedily as I had ever seen them disappear in similar cases in which mercury was employed. In the management of these cases, I have had the able assistance of Hospital Mate Macgibbon, and of Assistant Staff-Surgeon Blackadder.

The mild manner in which both chancres and suppurating buboes were observed to heal under this treatment in the Depôt Hos-

pital, induced the late Mr Hicks to follow a similar practice in the treatment of the men affected with syphilis of the 92d regiment, at that time stationed in Edinburgh Castle. The results which this gentleman obtained in the cases so treated, and which I had an opportunity of seeing until the regiment marched for Ireland, in April 1817, were precisely similar to those which I had obtained in the *Depôt Hospital*.

In the course of reporting the cases in these hospitals for my clinical lectures on military medicine, I was surprised to be informed, in February 1817, by Mr Kenning, resident surgeon of the Ordnance Medical Department, that a practice similar to that which I was following in syphilitic cases had been employed for a considerable period (I have reason to believe even some time previously to my appointment to the *Depôt Hospital*) by Mr Rose, surgeon of the Coldstream Guards, and I was happy to learn, that the results of his practice were similar to mine.

Soon after this period, the 88th regiment arriving here from France to replace the 92d, I found, that, in consequence of communications from London, the medical officers of this regiment had begun a short time before to treat all their syphilitic cases without mercury; and since that time, up to the present date, I have had an opportunity of seeing a very great number of syphilitic cases in this regiment treated in this manner, with uniform success, under the judicious management of Surgeon Johnston, and Assistant Surgeon Bartlett.

In private practice, I have followed a similar mode of treatment in a great number of syphilitic cases, many of which were seen by my friend Mr Turner, who for several years lived with me, and assisted me in my practice; and in treating these cases, I have obtained results in all respects similar to those stated to have taken place in the military hospitals.

Bubo in one or both groins, sometimes suppurating, and in other instances disappearing by resolution, has occurred in about one fourth of those affected with chancre, but in none of the chancres or buboes which I have seen treated without mercury, has any disposition to gangrenous inflammation, or to phagedenic ulceration, ever manifested itself,—occurrences which are so common in the treatment of these affections, under even the most careful employment of mercury. In a number of the cases of chancre, a hard tubercle, accompanied with discoloration of the skin, has been observed to remain for a considerable time after cicatrization, and this part has frequently shewn a disposition to become ulcerated, when it has either been neglected or has been irritated.



A sufficient length of time has not yet elapsed to enable us to ascertain in how many cases constitutional affections will occur, or what all the constitutional affections may be among those who have been cured of the primary symptoms of syphilis without the use of mercury. Of the cases which I have seen, the number in which constitutional symptoms have supervened, has not exceeded one in ten; and the only forms of these symptoms which have presented themselves, are ulcerations of the throat, and cutaneous eruptions, sometimes accompanied by inflammation of the eyes. The ulcerations of the throat have been few in number, and generally accompanied with cutaneous eruption; they have had an aphthous appearance, and have sometimes been attended with aphthæ of the inside of the mouth, enlargement of the tonsils, and swelling of the lymphatic glands of the neck. The cutaneous affections which have occurred have been, in several cases, a reddish mottled efflorescence of the skin, resembling roseola, in others, papular, pustular, scaly, or tubercular eruptions. These secondary symptoms have usually appeared in cases where the primary sores had been long in healing, and where they had left behind them indurated cicatrices. The time at which they have generally occurred, has varied from four to twelve weeks after the appearance of the primary ulcer. The affections of the throat have been slight in comparison with those which usually take place in venereal cases after the use of mercury. The cutaneous eruptions have been chronic in their nature, and have all, as well as the sore throats and inflammations of the eye, gradually, though sometimes slowly, disappeared without the use of mercury, and without seeming to have left any injurious effects behind them. I am inclined to believe, that, if mercury had been employed, the cutaneous affections, in several of these cases, might have been cured in a shorter period of time than that in which they have disappeared; but whether, in accelerating the cure of the cutaneous eruption, that remedy might not have excited other constitutional affections, is a point which future experience can alone determine.

The secondary symptoms of syphilis, I may remark, have not appeared to me to be more frequent in their occurrence in those patients who have been treated without mercury, than in those by whom that remedy has been freely employed. Hitherto I have had no opportunity of observing among patients treated for the primary symptoms without mercury, any of those deep or foul ulcers of the skin, of the throat, of the mouth and nose, or of the painful affections of the bones, which are stated by every writer on syphilis, as the genuine products of that disease. Among the very great number of such affections which have

presented themselves to my observation, one, or more frequently more than one, course of mercury had been employed.

The results I have now stated to you are satisfactory, I conceive, in so far as they seem to establish the possibility of every symptom of syphilis being cured without the use of mercury, and by this to lead to applications of the utmost importance in practice.

They also have a confirmation in, while they enable us to explain, the numerous, and apparently contradictory, statements which have at different times been given with regard to the efficacy of the various remedies which have been extolled for the cure of syphilis, from the first appearance of that disease in Europe to the present day.

Indeed, all the observations which I have had an opportunity of making upon the symptoms and progress of syphilis, tend to confirm me in an opinion which I have for several years taught in my lectures, that it is a chronic and not an acute disease; and that the rapid progress which it seems sometimes to make, and the exasperated symptoms which it exhibits, are not the genuine or necessary effects of syphilis, but may, in most instances, be traced to intemperance, to neglect, or to improper treatment.

What then, it may be asked, is the practical conclusion to which these views lead in the treatment of syphilis? Are we to abandon the use of mercury,—to reject it as a remedy which is unnecessary, and that may be injurious; and if mercury be laid aside, must we employ other remedies, such as guaiacum, sarsaparilla, or nitric acid, in its place; or may we safely trust the cure of this disease to the powers of nature alone?

Many years, I conceive, must elapse, before a satisfactory answer can be given to these questions. To be able to answer them, it must be ascertained, whether syphilis undergoes a spontaneous cure in all the forms in which it appears; and upon this being established, it must be also ascertained, whether by any, and by what means of treatment, the progress of this spontaneous cure may be accelerated or retarded.

The effect of mercury in accelerating the cure of syphilis seems to be too well established to admit of its being called in question; but in how far the use of this substance may or may not give a tendency to the recurrence of the disease in a more aggravated form, or may induce diseases different from, but resembling those described as arising from syphilis, are points still far from being sufficiently determined. The belief that syphilis can be cured safely and ultimately only by the use of mercury, is so deeply rooted in the minds of the public, and the prejudices of practitioners, are so much biassed in favour of the em-

ployment of that remedy for the cure of syphilis, that we cannot expect that its use, whether it shall be ultimately found to be necessary or not, will be generally given up, at least for a long time to come, in the private practice of our profession.

The practice however of treating venereal cases without the use of mercury, has now become very general in the British military hospitals, both at home and in France; and by a communication which I have had the pleasure to receive, at the desire of Sir James M<sup>c</sup>Grigor, from my friend Dr Theodore Gordon, I have reason to believe, that the results obtained do not differ materially from those which I have described. These results will soon, I hope, be communicated to the public; and much valuable information may be expected from the medical officers of the army who have devoted their attention to this subject, and whose situation affords them so much better opportunities than medical practitioners enjoy in the practice of civil life, of ascertaining whatever relates to the natural history or treatment of syphilis.

The following table of the cases which have been treated without mercury in the military hospitals here, since March 1816, exhibits a summary view of some of the results which have been detailed. I remain,

Dear Sir,

Very truly your's,

JOHN THOMSON, M. D.

5, George Street, }  
8th December 1817. }

Abstract of the cases of Primary Venereal Symptoms treated without the use of Mercury in the Consolidated Depôt Hospital, and in the Regimental Hospitals of the 92d and 88th Regiments in Edinburgh Castle, from March 1816 to December 1817.

Number of cases of primary symptoms treated,	155
Of these had buboes, a considerable proportion of which suppurated,	54
All cured.	
Of these cases, secondary symptoms have supervened in	14
In the form of ulceration of the throat in	1
————— of ulceration of the throat with cutaneous eruption in	2
————— of cutaneous eruptions alone in	10
————— of cutaneous eruption with iritis in	1*
All of which have disappeared.	

\* In seven other cases of eruption, attended with iritis, which have occurred to my observation, the disease has been cured without the use of mercury.