THE CONTRIBUTION OF JOHN WESLEY (1703-1791) TO MEDICAL LITERATURE

Advance in medical practice requires preparation of public opinion. Any acceptance of change from traditional methods needs powerful persuasion, which does not necessarily follow on from great scientific revelations. By the eighteenth century there had been many advances in the basic medical sciences, which had made no immediate impacts on clinical practice. The foundations of medical botany had been laid, but medical philosophers still preferred therapeutic systems based on metaphysics. Even so, the ideas of Mead, Brown and Hoffmann did not displace the general popularity of the humoral theory. Yet more fundamentally than this, the Copernican revolution's establishment of a heliocentric universe in astronomy did not in the least affect belief in astrological medicine, founded explicitly on the celestial map of geocentric theory.

Patients are even more conservative than their doctors. Established «cures» wherein parents and grandparents have placed their trust, carry a comfort that accompanies faith and hope. This comfort was often all the patient had. And the only result in which he was interested and could personally test was the efficacy of the therapy on himself. Attempts at independent statistical tests had to wait for Pierre C.A. Louis (1787-1872). Choice of treatment for a disease had perforce to remain empirical until the cause of that disease was known, when a remedy appropriate to it could be applied. Empiricism itself is comforting. Whilst it relies on experience, it is supported by faith and dogma and is perpetuated by the mystery and power of the medical practitioner.

Uncertainty in the public and professional mind meant that bleeding and polypharmacy were still accepted amongst the essential requirements for the patient. Not to use as many of the traditional remedies that could be quoted from established authorities as having been of use, was for the therapist to risk censure if the patient, as was only too likely, succumbed. Yet the remedies themselves were often more dangerous than the disease. With the benefit of hindsight we can now say that it was those who allowed the healing hand of nature to triumph who were most successful.

In the nature of things, there were too few doctors who tried to simplify instead of complicate treatment. Books were chiefly designed to persuade the reader to follow the system of medicine dependent on the theory of its begetter. There has always been a need for men of clear mind and literary ability to sift what is of value in current medical practice and communicate it to the public. Doctors do not always make the best sifters or communicators. Moreover, simple books of the Home Doctor type often attract their scorn. In the welter of confused theorising and self interestedness of the medical profession in the eighteenth century, it needed someone to help the patient decide what constitut-
ed good or bad medical practice — at least in general terms — by having set out for him a simple guide to what was best.

John Wesley, better known for his religious than his medical works, was a great traveller and his journals are alive with the people he met. It was for them he felt the need to provide a guide to health in his immensely popular *Primitive Physic*. By which title he meant to imply a return to the simplicity of tried remedies in place of those of medical philosophers, who substitute theory for true experience. It was against the sterility of unsubstantiated theorising that he cavilled and against the cavalier use of dangerous and unnecessary poisons.

John Wesley sets out his principles in an integral introduction, which was unfortunately not included in every edition. He shows that he was aware of the poverty of clinical science, which had not benefitted much from any of the scientific discoveries of the Renaissance and later. There had instead been a regression from the experiments of science to pre Renaissance metaphysics. He wrote that « men of a philosophical turn » had in the earlier period begun to enquire how the medicines they used wrought their effects. They examined the human body, and all its parts; the nature of the flesh, veins, arteries, nerves; the structure of the brain, heart, lungs, stomach, bowels; with the springs of the several kinds of animal functions... ». But later « men of learning began to set aside experience; to build physic upon hypothesis; to form theories of diseases and their cure, and to substitute these in the place of experiments » (1).

« As theories increased, simple medicines were more and more disregarded and disused: till in a course of years the greater part of them were forgotten... abundance of new ones were introduced by reasoning, speculative men: and those more and more difficult to be applied, as being more remote from common observation. Hence rules for the application of these, and medical books were immensely multiplied; till at length physic became an abstruse science, quite out of the reach of ordinary men » (2).

Wesley further feared the profit motive that compounded the mystique which now surrounded the doctors, so that they « filled their writings with abundance of technical terms, utterly unintelligible to plain men ». And with great perspicacity of the poverty of contemporary therapy, noted that « the compound medicines, consisting of so many ingredients, that is was scarce possible for common people to know which it was that wrought the cure ». Moreover, many of the ingredients were rare and costly, and others so dangerous that they needed to be personally directed by a physician. « And thus both their honour and gain were secured, a vast majority of mankind being utterly cut off from helping either themselves or their neighbours... » (3) He quotes Boerhaave’s caution against mixing drugs without evident necessity and the possibility of their incompatibility (4).

With the relative unavailability of physicians for the majority of citizens, John Wesley found the inaccessibility of sensible medical knowledge to be intolerable. He was impressed by the English writings of Dr Thomas Sydenham, Dr Thomas Dover and Dr George Cheyne. Using such sources, John Wesley decided on making « some little attempt towards a plain and easy way of curing most diseases » in the form of a simple book, *Primitive Physick, or an Easy and Natural Method of Curing Most Diseases* (1747). For « who would not wish to have a Physician always in his house, and one that attends without fee or reward? To be able (unless in some few complicated cases) to prescribe to his family, as well as himself? » (5) And thus Wesley sets out his book of simple remedies to be applied after ascertaining the nature of « your distemper », With the warning that in complicated cases, or where life is in immediate danger, « let everyone apply without delay, to a Physician that fears God » (6).

He opens the work with a few plain easy rules of health, chiefly transcribed
from Dr Cheyne. Dr George Cheyne (1671-1743) and his *Essay of Health and Long Life* (1724) has not altogether received the recognition which he deserves from medical historians. A native of Aberdeen, a student of Edinburgh and a pupil of Pitcairn he eventually settled in London, where he also wrote *An Essay on the True Nature and Due Method of Treating the Gout* (1720) and *The English Malady* (1733) which deals with neurasthenia and hypochondriasis.

Wesley's remedies are simple to follow and originally he did not intend to give many aids to diagnosis, having already given the *caveat* quoted above if the diagnosis seemed in doubt. But in the 1775 edition, « at the request of many persons », he added « plain definitions of most distempers... as are suited to men of ordinary capacities, and as may just enable them, in common simple cases, to distinguish one disease from another » (7).

*Primitive Physic* was Wesley's great contribution to the simplification of the best in current therapy. He omits what he calls « the four Herculean Medicines, Opium, the Bark, Steel and most of the preparations of Quicksilver » (7). He appears to have had some personal idiosyncracy to Quinine, which prejudiced him against this most efficacious remedy for the Ague. It went into at least 32 English and 9 Welsh editions.

Another of Wesley's medical heroes was Dr Simon-André Tissot (1728-1797) of Lausanne, although he was not entirely uncritical of all his methods. He chastised him for « his violent fondness for bleeding, his recommending it on the most trifling occasions ». He also regards as less than excellent his « amazing love of gysters ». Which leads Wesley to reflect whether Tissot « ever himself submitted to, or performed, the operation ? » (8) Wesley evidently did not enthuse about what the French cartoonists had lampooned as the English remedy.

Wesley's extensive reading is shown in his taking Tissot to task for his treatment of the Itch by internal medicines. « Can it be thought that so great a man as Dr Tissot never saw the « Transactions » of our Royal Society ? But if he has seen them, how could he utterly forget the paper communicated by Dr Mead, which puts it beyond all possible dispute, being a matter of ocular demonstration, that the itch is nothing but animalcule of a peculiar kind, burrowing under the scarf-skin. Yet, if he had not utterly forgot this, how came he to prescribe internal medicines for it ? Does any man prescribe vomits or purges to kill fleas or lice ? » (8)

Tissot desired that his *Avis au Peuple sur sa Santé*, Lausanne, 1761, should come into the hands of those « who are entrusted with the education of youth' and who « may also be supposed sufficiently intelligent to take some part in this work ». Wesley used Dr J. Kirkpatrick's English translation from the Lyons or second edition for his *Advices with Respect to Health. Extracted from a late Author [Dr. Tissot]. Bristol, 1769. The title was altered in the seventh edition of 1801 to *The Family Physician*; or, *Advice with Respect to Health: Including directions for the prevention and cure of acute diseases*, Wesley's other medical communication was a work to promot electrotherapy; *The Desideratum, or Electricity made Plain and Useful* (1760). As always, he had read widely and became excited by the experimental demonstrations of electricity. To Benjamin Wilson (1721-1788) and others whom Wesley quotes, it seemed to be in the nature of the Aether on which the ancients had speculated. It confirmed René Descartes' (1596-1650) subtle matter, Now it could actually be seen, the electric fire or in Wesley's words a flame that « issues from my finger, real flame, such as sets fire to spirits of wine » (9).

The use of electrotherapy had been reported in 1751 for palsy of the tongue at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary (10) and for other cases at Shrewsbury Hospital in 1754 (11). As early as 1756, John Wesley on 9 November having specially procured an apparatus « ordered several persons to be electrified, who were ill of various disorders: some of whom found an immediate, some a gradual
cure. From this time I appointed, first some hours in every week, and afterwards an hour in every day, wherein any that desired it, might try the virtue of this surprising medicine. Two or three years after, our patients were so numerous that we were obliged to divide them; so part were electrified in Southwark, part at the Foundery, others near St Paul's, and the rest near the Seven Dials. The same method we have taken ever since; and to this day, while hundreds, perhaps thousands, have received unspeakable good, I have not known one man, woman or child, who has received any hurt thereby: so that when I hear any talk of the danger of being electrified (especially if they are medical men who talk so), I cannot but imput it to great want either of sense or honesty» (12).

The medical profession were indeed reluctant to try the new remedy and John Wesley had already offered a somewhat cynical explanation for their behaviour in his journal of 20 January 1753. «I advised one who had been troubled many years with a stubborn paralytic disorder, to try a new remedy. Accordingly she was electrified, and found immediate help. By the same means I have known two persons cured of an inveterate pain in the stomach; and another of a pain in his side, which he had had ever since he was a child: nevertheless, who can wonder that many gentlemen of the faculty, as well as their good friends, the apothecaries, decry a medicine, so shockingly cheap and easy, as much as they do quicksilver and tar-water? » (13)

In 1760, anonymously, he published his Desideratum, wherein he had « endeavoured to comprise the sum of what has hitherto been published on this curious and important subject by Mr Franklin, Dr Headley, Mr Wilson, Watson, Lovett, Freke, Martin, Watkins and in the monthly magazines. But I am chiefly indebted to Mr Franklin for the speculative part and to Mr Lovett for the practical: though I cannot in everything subscribe to the sentiments of one or the other» (14).

John Wesley, the evangelist, specialised in communication. He was essentially a well educated, intelligent and enthusiastic divine of reasonably moderate views, who cared deeply for his fellows. His zeal to teach Christianity on the long journeys which he pursued with tireless energy, brought him into contact with all conditions of men. His mission was to teach them how to live and this entailed looking after their physical as well as their spiritual needs. He was ever a keen educationist. He found health education lacking and supplied it, choosing his medical authorities with care and selecting from their remedies with discretion.