

VOLTAIRE AND MEDICINE

“Doctors are men who prescribe medicines of which they know little, to cure diseases of which they know less, in human beings of whom they know nothing.” **Attributed to Voltaire**



By Honoré Daumier (1808-1879)

“Attributed to Voltaire.” Why the qualification? In his lengthy presidential address to the Section of the History of Medicine of the Royal Society of Medicine in 1925, English historian J.D. Rolleston remarked that he was *unable* to find this well-known quotation in any of Voltaire’s works. But he did find plenty that the 18th century French writer had written about doctors and the medical profession and what follows here is extracted from Dr. Rolleston’s scholarly speech. (“Voltaire and Medicine.” *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine*. vol 19: pp. 17-28, 79-94. 1926.)

Voltaire was the *nom de plume* of François-Marie Arouet (1694-1778), the French Enlightenment writer, historian, and philosopher famous for his wit and his advocacy of freedom of speech and religion. Voltaire's attention to medical matters, though partly a manifestation of his interest in every aspect of human activity, was doubtless related to his own feeble health — or hypochondriasis. During his long life, he variously claimed to have suffered from small pox, malaria, dyspepsia, colic, scurvy, apoplexy, prostatism, uremia and, according to his enemies, coprophagia. Evidently he tended to exaggerate his ailments and once acknowledged that "illness is not without great advantages."

Throughout his life Voltaire insisted upon the importance of a strict dietary regimen, sobriety and regular evacuation of bowels. In a letter to an admirer, he wrote that one of the gifts that he would require in a wife would be the ability to administer enemas rapidly and pleasantly. To be sure, he habitually consumed as many as a dozen cups of coffee every day although, late in life, his physician reduced his allowance to two or three cups mixed with chocolate.

Voltaire more or less followed medical advice — mostly less. He was fond of arguing with his doctors and said, "it's a good thing to ask doctors' advice sometimes, provided one does not believe them blindly. Another time, this aphorism: "The art of medicine consists of amusing the patient while nature cures the disease." This recalls a story about Moliere whom Louis XIV once asked, "What does your doctor do for you?" To which Moliere replied, "Sire, we converse, he orders remedies, I do not take them, and I recover." In disparaging earlier physicians of Moliere's time, Voltaire said:

They were very different from the practitioners of today. They almost always went about in a gown and bands and spoke in Latin. Even if the doctors today do not understand nature better, they have a better knowledge of the world and know that the great art of the doctor is to please. Moliere may have helped to abolish their pedantry, but the customs of the time which have undergone a complete change have helped still more.

Voltaire expanded on this difference when commenting on Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* (1657.) Pascal said that if medical men had not gowns and slippers, and doctors had not had square caps and gowns four times too large for them, they would never have "imposed upon society, which could not resist this display." To which Voltaire remarked that a doctor would incur ridicule nowadays, if he came to feel the patient's pulse and examine the stools clad in a gown.

In Voltaire's satire *Candide* (1759), the naive protagonist meets the eternally optimistic Dr. Pangloss and adopts his philosophy. The scholar explains that although he has contracted syphilis, which has ravaged his body, there's good reason for everything in this best of worlds. After all, syphilis is necessary because the infection leads back to a man who traveled to the New World with Columbus, and if Columbus had not traveled to the New World and brought syphilis back to Europe, then Europeans would not have enjoyed New World wonders such as chocolate.

Voltaire had this to say concerning the American origin of syphilis:

Although the discovery of America was at first a considerable benefit to the Spanish, it also brought very great misfortunes upon them. In the first place, Spain was depopulated by the number required for its colonies, and secondly, the universe became infected with a disease which previously had only been known in some parts of the hemisphere, and especially in the island of Hispaniola. Many of Christopher Columbus's companions were attacked by it and spread the contagion throughout Europe on their return. It is certain that the venom which poisons the source of life was peculiar to America, just as plague and smallpox were the original diseases of South Arabia.

He noted the prevalence of syphilis among the royalty, nobility and high clergy that was attributed to the houses of prostitution reserved for their use and the high incidence of the disease among soldiers is mentioned by Pangloss in *Candide*:

The disease has made a marvelous progress among us, and especially in those great armies which decide the destinies of the State; one may affirm that when 80,000 men are fighting against an equal number of troops on the opposite side, there are about 20,000 suffering from the disease in each army.

Voltaire once said that he'd read more books on medicine than Don Quixote had on chivalry. In one of his plays, when a surgeon admitted that war and syphilis were the source of his fortune, a colleague asks, "Are there no means of extirpating a contagion which devastates Europe?" The first surgeon replies:

There can be only one way. All the princes of Europe should form a league...Certainly a crusade against syphilis would be much more reasonable than those wretched crusades against Saladin, Maliksala and the Albigenses. It would be much better to learn how to repel the common foes of the human race than to be continually occupied with watching for the favorable memento to devastate the earth and cover the land with corpses in order to deprive one's neighbor of two or three towns or a few villages.

Voltaire's humanitarian spirit was revealed in an essay about the unsanitary state of contemporary prisons:

The prisons at Madrid which have been built in the great square are decorated with a facade of fine architecture. A prison should not resemble a palace, nor should it be like a charnel house. The complaint is made that most goals in Europe are cesspools of infection which disseminate disease and death not only within their own grounds but in their neighborhood as well. Daylight is absent and there is no ventilation. The prisoners have no communication with one another except by their pestiferous exhalations. They suffer a cruel punishment before sentence has been passed on them. Charity and a good police system should remedy this inhuman and dangerous negligence.

Voltaire deplored quacks and charlatans and cited one who sold a nostrum which he claimed would make a man live 150 years, "though it consisted merely

of Seine river water and a little nitro.” He trusted nature’s healing power.

You see recoveries from fevers and diseases of all kinds without it being proved whether it was nature or the doctor who wrought the cure; you see diseases of which the issue cannot be foretold. Twenty doctors are mistaken about them the one who has the most intelligence and the keenest insight divines the nature of the disease.....

It is true that regimen is better than medicine. It is true that for a very long time, out of a hundred doctors ninety-eight were charlatans. It is true that Moliere was right in making fun of them...It is none the less true that there are a hundred occasions on which a good doctor can save life and restore us the use of our limbs. If a man has an apoplectic stroke, an infantry captain or a court councillor will not cure him. Cataracts form in my eyes and the lady next door will not remove them. I make no distinction here between the physician and surgeon; these two professions have long been inseparable.A doctor promises his attention and not a cure. He does all he can and he is paid for that.....I only need doctors to finish me, but, thank God, I only see them for the pleasure of their conversation when they are intelligent, just as I see theologians without believing in either.

Similarly, in a letter to a friend: “I did not know that you had buried your doctor. I know of nothing so ridiculous as a doctor who does not die of old age, and I cannot conceive how one can expect to obtain health from persons who cannot cure themselves. It is a good thing...to ask their advice sometimes, provided one does not believe them blindly.”

Here’s another of Voltaire’s many satirical passages relating to doctors:

A neighboring doctor was at once sent for. He was one of those who visit their patients in a hurry, who mistake the case they are attending for the one they have just seen, and who blindly practice a science which is not devoid of uncertainty and danger even when the doctor possesses a sane and mature judgment. He made the disease twice as bad by his haste to prescribe a fashionable remedy. Fashion in medicine! This absurd idea was too common in Paris.

From the conclusion of J.D. Rolleston's speech to the Royal Society of Medicine:

Among other superstitions to which Voltaire refers are the influence of the moon on menstruation and on the crisis of fevers and of the tides of the ocean on death; the cure of paralysis by eels and of epilepsy by the fat of a man who had been hanged. These ideas, says he, and a thousand others have been the errors of charlatans in days gone by, who judged without reasoning, and after being deceived themselves, deceived others.

With the onset of the Enlightenment — the Age of Reason — the medical profession would soon transform to a legitimate science, albeit still beset with a surfeit of shady practitioners — and not only physicians. In closing, this from a letter written by Voltaire to the Marquis de Thibouville (1776):

The sick old man was talking yesterday to an apothecary at Geneva. Alas! It was only too often that he had conversations of this kind. 'By the way,' said the sick man, 'what is barberry a cure for?' 'Nothing at all,' replied the apothecary, 'like most remedies.' 'And where do you get barberry lozenges?' continued the sick man. 'They are made at Dijon,' the apothecary replied. 'I happen to have a small box.' 'Send it to me at once,' said the sick man. He did so, and 'I am sending it on to you.'



