ENGLISH DOMESTIC MEDICINE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY—II

From the Letters of Josiah Wedgwood

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Acute Rheumatism

On March 30, 1772, at the age of 42 years, just eight months after the birth of her fifth child, Mrs. Wedgwood was seized with an illness which, without undue speculation, we might diagnose as acute rheumatic fever.

'We had Dr. Darwin with her yesterday, He says he is afraid her disorder will be stubborn, they have bled her twice and are now going to blister her. She is very ill, not the least help for herself. Her wrists, shoulders, neck, Hips, knees, Ancles and feet are all violently affected, and she is as complete a Cripple as you can easily imagine. Dr. Darwin has order'd her to Buxton, to bathe there as soon as she is able.'

On April 11:

'Mrs. Wedgwood joins me in thanking you very sincerely for your good wishes to her, and I have the pleasure to tell you she is got so much better as to take an airing on Horsback yesterday, but we have now a rainy morning, and she is not quite so well today, which may be owing to the weather. The return of the Sun, with the approaching spring, and the aid of some one or other of our Watering places, will, I hope, restore her to her wonted state of health again.'

A month later, however, she was still unable to dress herself and not fit to travel. Early in June she visited Bath to take the cure, which in the first place consisted of taking the water:

'In the morning, drink three or four glasses of scalding hot water from the Pump, and sweat it out in the *least hot* places we can find out the remainder of the day.'

The next stage is the bath:

'Mrs. Wedgwoods lameness continues so long in her knees and feet without any amendment that I cannot keep being much concern'd least it should fix in those parts, especially her knees, as they seem the most affected, and make a crackling noise like dryd parchment whenever she bends them. I have some hopes from bathing, and if it agrees with her in other

respects I suppose we must try its effect a fortnight or longer in which time I know she will have a longing after home and her Bratts.'

The bathing did not suit her so she decided to give the pump another try for a few more days before returning home. This she did and then made the journey to Etruria, travelling by London, where they stayed with the Bentleys. She reached home on July 13. On September 7 she had a serious miscarriage and for a time was at death's door. For two months she continued gravely ill and just as she was beginning to gather strength she developed 'an ugly fever with ague fits at uncertain periods.' Two days later the rigors ceased and Dr. Darwin prescribed the bark to prevent the return of the fever fits. Her physician took her to his house at Lichfield where she so rapidly recovered that a month later she was able to accompany her husband to Manchester to see the end of the term display of the children at school and bring them home for the Christmas vacation. But she was not long to remain well for on Christmas Eve 'my poor girl was taken ill.'

'A sudden sickness and giddiness siezed her, which was followed by faintings, attended with cold sweats, and her legs and arms and face as cold as clay. In this terrible situation she continued for many hours when we thought every moment wo-d be her last. When she could be sensible of anything she complain'd of most severe cold, which baffled all our endeavours with hot flannels, hot bricks, chafing etc. to remove 'till about 3 in the afternoon, when her natural heat began to return and her sickness begun to abate a little, and from that time she has had no returns of it, and we are very willing to flatter ourselves with the pleasing hopes of her recovery though that must be a work of time she is again reduced to such an extreme weak state, and will be confin'd to her bed for some time.'

'I sent for her favourite Esculapius, who came here last night and he is just left us. He says if we can preserve her thro' the cold

weather to april, she will do very well, and make a perfect recovery in the summer, for this purpose he advises me to bring her to Lichfield as soon as she is able to travel so far with safety, the air there being milder than with us, and from thence to take her to Bath for the Winter which he thinks will now be of great service to her. I intend to follow the Doctors advice, but when we shall be able to begin our journey it is impossible to say, or when I shall have the pleasure of seeing you in Town, I have not the least idea, I would not have been from home on Thursday morning for a Kingdom, for the fate of my poor Sally was then several times so nicely balanc'd, that a very little foolish treatment, a trifle, might have decided against her.'

A week later he writes to a friend to procure for him 'some water of life for my Wife. It is called Nevil Holt water, and the spring is near Harboro' beyond Leicester from this place.' Then two months later, on his return from a visit to Bentley in London, Wedgwood writes:

'I got safe and well home last night and found my friends pretty well, only my Poor Girl, who was confin'd to her room and very weak and poorly, but in pretty good spirits, and chearfull as usual,—I wish I could stop the account here without proceeding to tell my Dear Friend that she has this morning had a most severe return of her complaint, and God knows what will be the consequence. She is reduced to the lowest degree imaginable, and how to treat her I do not know.'

So she continued for the next six weeks and despite his genuine anxiety Wedgwood felt the interference with his other loyalty, his art and craft:

'I wish my Dear Friend, we had better Wives—No harm in the wish I hope. Mine has some symptoms this morning not very pleasing but her Doct^r has taken a little blood and order'd her to be still, and hopes things may not grow worse.'

Later she went into Cheshire to convalesce at her brother's home and thence to Buxton for the month of September. This was the year 1772, 12 months of mortal sickness and anxiety. However she gradually recovered her strength and survived confinements in 1774, 1776 and 1778. What is more she outlived her husband by 20 years, achieving the ripe old age of 81 years.

Paralysis

Mary Ann, the Wedgwoods' youngest child, became a cripple from a rather different type of illness. At the age of 10 months we learn:

'Our little girl, Mary Ann breeds her teeth very hardly, and unfortunately several of them

are pushing forward at the same time. This brought on convulsions which lasted thirteen hours without intermission the first attack, which was on Friday morning, and when this left her we found she had lost the use of her arm and leg on one side. She had a slight return for about half an hour the last night, but is better again today.'

Then follows a most remarkable reference to treatment:

'Doct^r Darwin was here on Friday and order'd our little girl to be electrified two or three times a day on the side affected, and to be continued for some weeks. We are willing to flatter ourselves that she has received some benefit from electricity already, as she begins to move her arm and leg a little and this will encourage us to proceed in the same course.' The Doct^r gives us great hopes of our poor little girls limbs being restored, even without the assistance of the electric shocks, but apprehends they will hasten the cure and thereby prevent the diseased limbs being shorter than the others which must be the case if they continue long in their present inactive state. We have lanced her gums and keep them open, as the teeth do not yet appear, by means of the sharp end of an ivory modelling tool. I am the electrician upon this occasion which must confine me at home for some time.'

In the course of the ensuing fortnight there was no improvement.

'I am in great pain for my dear little girl, for though she is better, that is recover'd considerably from the great weakness, and stupor which the convulsions left upon her, yet she recovers very little use of her hand and leg, and is not quite clear of spasms in the diseased hand and foot. I have on this account discontinued the use of electricity, from which I do not know whether she recieved any benefit or not.

'We have every reason to hope that her intellects have escaped in this terrible shock, as she knows what is said to her, and begins to play a little as usual.'

But a month later there was a relapse.

'On Thursday evening our little girls convulsions became incessant, and so violent that we could scarcely hold her in the warm bath. Opiates had no effect at all upon her, and she continued in this dreadful situation 'till midnight, when she became motionless in every part, but, to our great joy, about 6 O'Clock she began to stir her head, and limbs. But how was our joy damped, and turned to the most poignant grief, when we found the return of reason wanting. She did not know any of us,

but seem'd quite in fright when we came near her. She was quite ravenous after meat, and bit her hands and arms when she was not satisfied. But, thank God, these frightfull symptoms have disappear'd. She is, by the help of some good sweet sleep, grown mild, and herself again, and recovers her little words, and natural wonted motions one after another. As she is quiet at present we do nothing to her, but keep a perpetual blister upon her neck, and in case of another attack Dr. Darwin assures us that no drug whatever is to be rely'd upon but opium—"All the boasted nostrums only take up time, and as the disease is often of short duration they have gain'd credit which they do not deserve.—If they contain opium, they will often relieve; but the common ones are only *animal charcoal*, as burnt blood, a baken raven etc. They may be tried, I believe, innocently. Animal charcoal may have some effect, as candle snuffs are said to cure the ague."—So far our Esculapius. But regular physicians, you know, cannot encourage nostrums, nor prescribe them, unless a few, such as James's fever powders etc. which have, by universally acknowledg'd merit, worked their own way into the *materia medica*. So even then patent medicines and household remedies were opposed and condemned by qualified physicians.

Then on December 29, 1779, there were glad tidings:

'Our dear little girl has got her sight again very perfectly we hope, and her limbs are recovering their wonted use every day. She is quite well and as wild as a little buck, or rather a doe if you please.'

So ended an illness which had caused fearful anxiety in the house for two months and perhaps permitted the parents on January 1, 1780, to hope that a happy new year was before them. Whatever the nature of this illness and whether it left any ill effects is not recorded, but Mary Ann died in childhood.

The reference to the electrical treatment of paralysed muscles reveals that Dr. Darwin was cognizant of the work of the Italian physiologist Luigi Galvani (1737-1798). As, however, the child's illness occurred in 1779 it is evident that knowledge of Galvani's work had been applied before the actual publication in 1791 of his treatise 'On the Force of Electricity in Muscular Movement.' The knowledge, however, may have been derived from the experiments of their mutual friend Dr. Joseph Priestley, to which Wedgwood made reference in a letter to Bentley on October 9, 1766.

'I am much pleas'd with your disquisition upon the capabiltys of Electricity, and should

be glad to contribute in any way you can point out to me towards rendering Doctr Priestleys very ingenious experiments more extensively usefull.'

That Priestley was concerned in the storage of electricity is suggested by an allusion in March, 1767:

'Pray has Doct^r Priestley made any more experiments relative to gilding by Electricity? I did not understand what you meant by the *Battery* he had some thoughts of attempting, was it for a Copper work?'

Colds and Influenza

Investigation of the common cold is one of the great research projects of today and so it is of considerable interest to mark the allusions in the correspondence to this malady as it occurred 200 years ago. Colds, sometimes associated with fever and sore throat, from time to time but usually in the winter months and early spring, affected various members of the family. On one occasion Wedgwood records that he was so affected on a journey from London during which 'he was thoroughly starv'd in some of their bad open Chaise, in the morning and evening.' At another time the bust maker and his family were ill of a fever for some weeks and Wedgwood 'contracted the infection by being so much in the room with him.' Treatment varied according to the severity of the symptoms; if sharp this consisted of 'water gruel, Barking (cinchona bark) and keeping the fire warm,' but when of lesser degree a more hardy course was followed, 'a puke (possibly a scruple or half a drachm of powdered ipecacuanha), and the cold bath, and pump and rides and walks.'

In November, 1775, England was 'visited by an epidemic of influenza.' First the Bentley household in London are reported down with 'this ugly disorder' and within a week the Wedgwood family are stricken. Mrs. Wedgwood's attack was slight but her aged father at Spen Green in Cheshire was 'very poorly and confined to the chimney corner.' Wedgwood himself was slightly feverish, had a persistent irritating cough and his head was stuffed full so that he felt stupid and could not sleep. Mr. Bent, the local surgeon, brought news that the disorder was bad and almost universal in Manchester and even worse at Liverpool. In Staffordshire 'many people are extremely ill of it in this neighbourhood, and there is no knowing when one has done with it, for it repeats its visits to the same persons very frequently.' The disorder reigned for two months and 'closed the scene with some old people, but young and middle-aged patients get through it very well.' At Burslem it was very mortal. At Dr. Solander advised that 'pretty good living is an

antidote for the malady but not infallible in preventing an attack.'

For several weeks afterwards the victims were slow to recover. Cough, weakness and fainting attacks were not infrequent, and in the case of Mrs. Wedgwood's uncle John 'copious spitting of blood with an inward pain.'

To the relief of all the epidemic, which had swept the country from the south and raged for two months, came to an end with the onset of severe weather and heavy snowfalls.

The Smallpox

In the 18th century smallpox was endemic in England and a loathsome, disfiguring disease which few children escaped. This excerpt from a medical treatise of the time (Buchan, 1769) presents a picture of the condition as it must have been familiar to Wedgwood and his contemporaries.

'It is common among the poor to see two or three children lying in the same bed, with such a load of pustules that even their skins stick together. One can hardly view a scene of this kind without being sickened by the sight. But how must the effluvia affect the poor patients, many of whom perish by this usage!

'A very dirty custom prevails among the lower class of people, of allowing children in the small-pox to keep on the same linen during the whole period of that loathsome disease. This is done lest they should catch cold; but it has many ill consequences. The linen becomes hard by the moisture which it absorbs, and frets the tender skin. It likewise occasions a bad smell, which is very pernicious, both to the patient and those about him; besides, the filth and sordes which adhere to the linen being resorbed, or taken up again into the body, greatly augment the disease.'

In a letter from Adrianople dated April 1, 1717, Lady Mary Wortley Montague had recorded the means whereby the Turks alleviated this disorder.

'A propos of distemper, I am going to tell you a thing that will make you wish yourself here. The small-pox, so fatal and so general amongst us, is here entirely harmless, by the invention of *engrafting*, which is the term they give it. There is a set of old women, who make it their business to perform the operation, every autumn, in the month of September, when the great heat is abated. People send to one another to know if any of their family has a mind to have the small-pox; they make parties for this purpose, and when they are met (commonly fifteen or sixteen together) the old woman comes with a nut-shell full of the matter of the best sort of small-pox, and asks what veins you please to have open'd. She immediately rips

open that you offer to her with a large needle (which gives you no more pain than a common scratch) and puts into the veins, as much matter as can lie upon the head of her needle, and after that, binds up the little wound with a hollow bit of shell, and in this manner opens four or five veins. The Grecians have commonly the superstition of opening one in the middle of the forehead, one in each arm, and on the breast, to mark the sign of the cross; but this has a very ill effect, all these wounds leaving little scars, and is not done by those that are not superstitious, who chuse to have them in the legs, or that part of the arm that is concealed. The children or young patients play together all the rest of the day, and are in perfect health to the eighth. Then the fever begins to seize them, and they keep their beds two days, very seldom three. They have very rarely above twenty or thirty in their faces, which never mark, and in eight days time they are as well as before their illness. Where they are wounded, there remains running sores during the distemper, which I don't doubt is a great relief to it. Every year thousands undergo this operation, and the French Ambassador says pleasantly, that they take the small-pox by way of diversion, as they take the waters in other countries. There is no example of any one that has died in it, and you may believe I am well satisfied of the safety of this experiment, since I intend to try it on my dear little son. I am patriot enough to take pains to bring this useful invention into fashion in England, and I should not fail to write to some of our Doctors very particularly about it, if I knew any one of them that I thought had virtue enough to destroy such a considerable branch of their revenue, for the good of mankind. But that distemper is too beneficial to them, not to expose to all their resentment, the hardy wight that should undertake to put an end to it. Perhaps, if I live to return, I may, however, have courage to war with them. Upon this occasion, admire the heroism in the heart of

'Your friend, etc. etc.'

This letter is contained in a collection published in London in 1763 and it is evident that Wedgwood was possessed of a copy, for in September, 1772, we find him studying it closely to acquaint himself of how the people in these distant lands conducted their eating and drinking and furnished the 'Ladies Harams' and their bathrooms and decorated the walls of their mosques. Apparently his interest was directed to business possibilities whereby his productions might replace the rich vases and wares of Japan and China. His own attack of the disease in childhood with its un-

fortunate sequel was a misfortune he could not forget and no doubt this volume, in the first instance, had interested him in relation to inoculation against the smallpox, by which he might safeguard his children against the virulence of almost certain attack. According to Guthrie (1945) 'the method employed in England was to make a superficial incision in the arm, and to draw through it a thread soaked in the fluid from a smallpox pustule.'

Wedgwood records the inoculation of five of his eight children and of his nephew Jacky Willett. It would appear that it was customary to carry out the operation within a few months of birth, though in the case of his first born, Sukey, it was delayed until she was aged one year and eleven months; a not unnatural parental caution. Then again it would appear that arrangements were made for several persons to be done at the same time; thus Sukey and her baby brother Jack were done together, while young Joss attended with his cousin Jacky Willett.

The disease must have been really serious and the cause of grave fear to parents for inoculation was evidently attended by very considerable disorder to the patient and anxiety to all. Certainly it was not so benign as suggested by Lady Mary Montague. On February 18, 1767, Wedgwood writes:

'I have inoculated my Boy and Girl, the latter is at Newcastle and I am just going to see her, she began to be Ill yesterday being the eighth.' Five days later he confides to Bentley:

'I thank you for your kind solicitude for our Children, they are now past the worst and I

hope out of danger from that terrible disorder the small-pox. They both had Convulsions at the first appearance of the eruption and have had a *pretty smart* pox as our Doctor terms it. I believe they have had no dangerous symptoms, but have been so very Ill that I confess I repented what we had done, and I much question whether we should have the courage to repeat the experiment, if we had any more subjects for it, however I am very thankful that all is so well with them, and I hope they will not have reason to wish their Parents had acted otherwise than they have done.'

Again on June 19, 1770:

'Did I tell you that we had inoculated Joss, he is now at the height of the disorder, the eruption is of a good sort, but thick and teizes the poor fellow sadly, but hope he will now be soon well over it. Jacky Willett is under the same circumstances, only much better.'

Sally, in her turn, was done as a baby of just under six months (1777), but on this occasion the only mention is, 'This is the eighth day and she is beginning to be ill,' and five days later, 'Sally is very well—considering.' Familiarity with the course of the operation had, apparently, by now brought a measure of equanimity.

Wedgwood died in 1795 and so did not live to know the eternal fame of him whom he knew as the 'Doctor of Gloucester,' for it was not until May 14, 1796, that Edward Jenner 'vaccinated' James Phipps, a boy of eight years, with pus from the hand of a dairymaid, Sarah Nelmes, who had become infected with cowpox (Guthrie, 1945).

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