

Enlightenment evidence: William Cullen

During the 2009 Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Sibbald Librarian Iain Milne and College Historian Dr Morrice McCrae presented their favourite 18th-century books and manuscripts from the College Library, which houses one of Scotland's most important collections from that time. William Cullen featured heavily in the talk.

William Cullen, Professor of Medicine at the University of Edinburgh from 1766 to 1768 (and President of the RCPE, 1773–75) had a successful and lucrative mail-order medical practice. Uniquely, the College Library holds thousands of manuscript letters written by patients to Cullen and 21 folio volumes containing copies of his advice to them.

Most letters to Cullen came from Scottish cities and towns, but a number of patients contacted him from English locations and further afield: Dublin, Antwerp, Rouen, Berlin, Cadiz and New Orleans. Cullen's standard charge for advice was one guinea and he answered most of his inquiries within a day.

The letters were collected from the post office by an assistant, who registered each piece of mail. Cullen would then read the letters and dictate his reply before leaving for patient visits around Edinburgh. 'My hurry has obliged me to employ another hand to transcribe this letter which I hope you'll excuse,' he wrote in 1766. On his return, Cullen would check and sign the letters and his assistant would write out any necessary prescriptions. The entire reply was copied for future reference and stored in folios.

Cutting-edge technology

In 1781, Cullen started using a copying machine that had just been invented by the engineer James Watt. The original letter would be closely pressed against thin, chemically prepared copy paper with the help of a roller. The copy, previously dipped in a solution of vinegar, turned dark brown where it touched the ink.



William Cullen ran a lucrative mail-order medical practice. Thousands of letters from patients, as well as his replies, remain in the College Library.

Often the patients' personal accounts were quite long and written with the help of the local doctor. In one case, from 1787, Cullen was asked to review five daily pulse readings of a Mrs Murray, all recorded with a stopwatch before and after the patient had spent 15 minutes exercising on a swing. In several instances Cullen was sent the autopsy reports of his previous cases.

Medical advice

What could eighteenth-century physicians actually do besides providing reassurance? Doctors at that time believed that every conflict between disease and the individual was a unique experience. The sick person's constitution was crucial and it was determined by heredity, environment and the effects of lifestyle. Natural healing forces located within the human organism reacted against injurious outside powers.

Doctors focused on supporting the patient's endangered constitution and assisting the body's natural healing tendencies, while preventing further injuries caused by lifestyle and climate.

Cullen often suggested changes in environment and lifestyle for his affluent and often indolent clientele. He issued detailed dietary instructions, often indicating that eating meat products and drinking alcohol should be restricted. As for drug treatments, Cullen was keen that his patients' bowels stayed open with the help of laxatives such as aloe pills and asafoetida.

He often used a stimulating regimen for 'constitutional weakness', prescribing Peruvian bark extract, camphor and the powdered leaves of hemlock. To combat dyspepsia, Cullen provided soft lozenges or aromatic pills made of cinnamon, ginger and syrup, the so-called saline julep, and aqueous solutions of juniper. For pain, he prescribed opium pills prepared with soap and syrup or used laudanum, although he was always aware of their habit-forming qualities.

Cullen's patients were important to him, not their diseases. He was attentive, efficient and supportive and his advice was accompanied with plausible explanations of the reasons for their diseases.

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Sibbald Librarian, RCPE

Further reading

Doig A, Ferguson JPS, Milne I et al. *William Cullen and the eighteenth century medical world: a bicentenary exhibition and symposium arranged by the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh in 1990*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; 1993.