

## REFERENCES

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### THE MOST FAMOUS CASE OF ASTHMA IN SCOTTISH HISTORY

*Girolamo Cardano (1501–1576)*  
*Ars curandi parva, Basle, 1564*

In 1551, Girolamo Cardano was professor of medicine at Pavia and one of the most famous scholars in Europe. His published works had included important contributions to mathematics as well as an encyclopaedia of natural science which contained many remarkable observations for its day.

In Scotland, John Hamilton was Archbishop of St Andrews, Keeper of the Privy Seal and Treasurer of Scotland. His brother James, Earl of Arran, was regent and tutor to the young Mary, Queen of Scots. During the troubled minority of Mary, the Hamiltons were, in effect,

ruling Scotland. The Archbishop, however, was suffering from a debilitating illness and his illness had become an issue of national concern. Unable to provide any effective treatment, his physician, William Cassanate, wrote in desperation to the greatest medical man in Europe, Girolamo Cardano, and urged him to come to Scotland to treat the Archbishop. It was a well-timed request, for Cardano had just resigned as professor at Pavia and was free to take up the opportunity to travel. Cassanate met the great man in Lyons and accompanied him back to Scotland.

For six weeks the Italian did nothing but observe the Archbishop and the attempts of his physicians to help him. Hamilton steadily became worse. Cardano then intervened, diagnosed asthma, and prescribed an intricate set of measures. This mainly consisted of a new diet, regular exercise, and plenty of rest and sleep. Most important of all, however, was the instruction that he should not sleep on a pillow or a bed made of feathers. The importance of this connection was not clearly understood by the medical profession for another three centuries. Hamilton improved rapidly and Cardano returned to Italy.

Two years later, a Scotsman arrived in Milan with a letter to Cardano from the Archbishop.

'I thank you ... for my health, that is in great part restored, for the almost complete subjugation of my disease, for strength regained; in fine, I may say, for life recovered. All those good things, and this body of mine itself, I hold as received from you ... the accustomed attacks now scarcely occur ... and then not as they used to be, but are felt very slightly.'

Girolamo Cardano gave two separate accounts of his successful treatment of Archbishop Hamilton's asthma. These are included in a collection entitled *Ars curandi parva*. On the title page of the College copy are inscribed the words –

'Ex bibliotheca Joan: hammiltoun  
[i.e. John Hamilton].'

The Italian's medical treatment of John Hamilton proved to be more successful than the horoscope he wrote for the Archbishop. Cardano predicted he would enjoy a long and happy life. In 1571 Archbishop Hamilton was executed for treason.

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