

NOW AND THEN: A BEASTLY POINT OF VIEW

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Oh Moseley! thy book nightly phantasies rousing,
Full oft makes me quake for my heart's dearest treasures;
For fancy in dreams, oft presents them all browsing
On Commons, just like little Nebuchadnezzar,
(There)! nibbling at thistle, stand Jem, Joe and Mary,
On their foreheads, oh horrible! crumpled horns bud;
(There)! Tom with his tail, and William all hairy,
Reclined in a corner, are chewing the cud.¹

The fear of transferring disease from animals to man is not new. For ages past, man has considered himself superior to all other creatures, with distinct boundaries separating him from all lesser beings. Any divergence from this principle has always been regarded with suspicion, curiosity and anxiety. This is certainly as true nowadays with regard to contemporary concern with 'mad cow disease'. As Machiavelli suggested:

There is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more dubious of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new.

Edward Jenner's work on vaccination against smallpox in the late eighteenth century using the lymph or matter from cow-pox vesicles - a naturally occurring disease affecting the udders of cows and acquired by those such as milkmaids who were in close contact with these - and introducing it into individuals as a defence against a more serious disease, smallpox, understandably caused alarm. Dr William Rowley of Oxford wrote a pamphlet in 1805 in which he mentioned the fate of a boy whose face 'seemed to be in a state of transforming, and assuming the visage of a cow' following vaccination (Figure 1).² He wrote:

how...it would be cruel, for the world to know who had laboured under the cow-pox mange, evil ulcer, or any other beastly disease, it might infallibly injure their fortune in life, particularly in matrimonial alliances. Who would marry into any family, at the risk of their offspring having filthy beastly disease?

Dr Moseley was another anti-vaccinator and the verse quoted above was supposedly from a reader of one of his pamphlets.

Various artists drew attention graphically to the controversy engendered by vaccination. In his print *The cow-pock or The wonderful effects of the new inoculation*, published in 1802, Gillray illustrated those vaccinated showing the development and extrusion of bovine-like tumours issuing from various parts of their anatomy. A lesser-known print, Isaac Cruikshank's *Vaccination against smallpox, or Mercenary and merciless spreaders of death and devastation driven out of society* (Figure 2), published six years later, illustrates the antagonism shown by those whose vested interests lay in the old order - that of smallpox inoculation or variolation.



FIGURE 1

E. Pugh's engraving *Cow-poxed, ox-faced boy* from William Rowley's *Cow-pox inoculation no security against smallpox infection*. London: 1805.*

In this print, Jenner is holding a scarifier inscribed with the words 'milk of human kindness'. Retreating from his advance are three out-dated practitioners still using the old practice of inoculation whereby matter from smallpox pustules was directly inoculated into a scarified area of the recipient's skin; the magnified tools of their trade dripping with pus are labelled 'the curse of human kind'. One of the three is saying 'Curse on these Vaccinators. We shall all be starved, why Brother I have matter enough here to kill 50'. The second one adds 'And these would communicate it to 500 more'. 'Aye, Aye', states the third, 'I always order them to be constantly in the air, in order to spread the contagion'. In their wake lie dead and dying pock-marked individuals.

The older practice of inoculation had been similarly rejected by those with vested interests in the previous 'old order'. Smallpox had been generally accepted as an act of God against which there was no defence. In spite of strict quarantine controls, smallpox was always present to a varying degree, sometimes reaching epidemic proportions. Direct inoculation of infected material - usually via the nostrils or by scarifying the skin - from patients suffering from a mild form of the disease was widely used in the East. Two papers read at the Royal Society in 1713-1716 describe this method being used in Constantinople. The practice received little attention in Europe until Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, wife of the British Ambassador at Constantinople,

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FIGURE 2

Isaac Cruikshank's engraving *Vaccination against smallpox, or Mercenary and merciless spreaders of death and devastation driven out of society*. London: S.W. Fores; 1808. BM no. 11093.

studied its use there, and had her own son inoculated (or 'variolated' as the practice was called later). On her return to England she informed George I of the method, urging its use in this country. She, prophetically, drew attention to the opposition which would follow from the medical fraternity in a letter sent from Adrianople:

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.³

Six condemned criminals were offered their freedom if they consented to be inoculated. These human tests proved successful and afterwards members of the Royal Family were inoculated. The Royal seal of approval thus given resulted in the practice becoming widespread. Sometimes virulent forms of the disease followed such practices, with fatal consequences.

This was the position until Jenner produced his method of vaccination along with the perceived threat of beastly contamination of those who succumbed. It took ten years

for the practice of vaccination to become generally accepted.

As far as present day 'mad cow disease' is concerned, only research and open-minded testing of different theories of its cause will lead to adequate treatment and control - not a blinkered approach by those with vested interests. 'Surley, [sic]' says a figure behind Jenner in Cruikshank's print, 'the disorder of the Cow is preferable to that of the Ass.'

REFERENCES

- ¹ Quoted from *Physic and physicians: a medical sketch book*. London: 1839; 3:80.
- ² Rowley W. *Cow-pox inoculation no security against smallpox infection*. London: 1805.
- ³ Montagu, Lady Mary Wortley. *Letters from the Levant, during the embassy to Constantinople 1716-1718*. London, 1838; letter XXXV, 1 April. To Miss Sarah Chiswell.

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