

Quacks and their Cures

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INTRODUCTION

Bad doctors or peddlers of fake remedies are often referred to as quacks. This is not derived from the famous Dr. Donald Duck, a Scottish GP who practised in Mallaigh⁽¹⁾ and was born just before the advent of the cartoon aquatic bird of that ilk, but apparently is a corruption of the Dutch term “quacksalver”⁽²⁾. Now spelled kwakzalver in the modern Dutch this referred to any person who sold medicines. Presumably the term was used because quicksilver, or mercury, was one of the important remedies on offer, being at the time the only known treatment for one of the most common and devastating conditions: syphilis. (Figure 1)

Eventually the term quack became attached to any person who provided unsatisfactory or unconventional treatment⁽³⁾.

In 1858 the Medical Register was created in the UK and only registered doctors could prescribe medicines or call themselves medical doctors. The General Medical Council (GMC) was established to keep the Medical Register and supervise the doctors’ professional and ethical behaviour. “Proper” doctors could now be looked up in the register.⁽⁴⁾ For many years this was strictly adhered to and alternative medical practice was heavily discouraged. In recent years there has been a trend towards other forms of medical practice, alternative and complementary, so now may be a good time to look at some of the famous “quacks” of the past and perhaps also shed light on present day purveyors of healthcare.

This issue of WEMJ highlights a family of “quacks” from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is, of course, difficult to distinguish a seventeenth century quack from a seventeenth century bona-fide doctor. The common treatments of purging and blood-letting did no end of harm so it may seem invidious to pick on one family but, for better or worse, this particular family have come in for considerable criticism over the years. In fact there was much to admire in the family but also some definite quackery.



Figure 1

A medical illustration attributed to Albrecht Dürer (1496) depicting a person with syphilis. Here, the disease is believed to have astrological causes. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_syphilis)

THE CHAMBERLEN DYNASTY

The Chamberlens were Huguenots from Paris. As the result of religious persecution, they emigrated to England,

arriving in Southampton in 1569. William Chamberlen was a surgeon and his two sons, both named Peter, followed in his profession becoming barber surgeons and famous and successful practitioners



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of midwifery^(5,6). Peter the Elder (d 1631) is credited with having invented the obstetric forceps, a device the Chamberlens kept secret within the family for one hundred years.

It is for this reason that the family is usually pilloried but one must consider it in the light of the medical practice of that era. The Chamberlens were constantly being harassed by the College of Physicians because of their prescribing of drugs without consulting a member of the college. In 1612 the elder Peter was prosecuted and put in Newgate gaol but was freed by the Lord Chamberlain. During this period they were successfully delivering babies that other surgeons could not and the Chamberlens tried valiantly to improve midwifery. In 1616 the brothers supported a "*humble petition of the midwives in and about the city of London ... that the said midwives be incorporated and made a Societie.*" The College of Physicians opposed this, stating that they, the physicians, could advise midwives in their art.

The younger Peter was prosecuted for prescribing in 1620. Is it any wonder that they did not wish to relinquish the secret of their success?

Peter the Younger had a son, also called Peter (1601-1683), who continued in the family obstetric practice but who did manage to become a Fellow of the College of Physicians and a very famous accoucheur (male midwife). He also petitioned the King for permission to set up a college of midwifery and, despite being one of their fellows, it was again opposed by the College of Physicians.

Dr. Peter's son Hugh also practised obstetrics, using the family forceps. He translated into English and published Francois Mauriceau's text entitled "*Observations sur la grossesse et l'accouchement*" using the title *The Accomplish't Midwife*.

Paul Chamberlen (1636–1717), second son of Dr. Peter, exhibited definite elements of quackery, inventing the "*anodyne necklace*" which supposedly provided pain relief for teething infants and for women in labour. Made of artificial amber beads the necklace had no real benefits. They are still available for sale today.⁽⁷⁾ And they still don't work!



Figure 2 Paul Chamberlen (1636–1717)

CONCLUSION

The Chamberlens became very rich from their midwifery practise but in my opinion they deserved to be successful. Unlike the leeching and purging physicians of that era the Chamberlens were actually helping their patients. Maintaining the secret of obstetric forceps was a commercial necessity due to the lack of enforced patent law.

The quackery was really only confined to Paul Chamberlen and his useless necklace, which is still available today.

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