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The King's Evil

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Paul R Goddard
Visiting Professor
University of the West of England

The Touch of the King

The King's Evil is a strange title for a talk to a medical-history society. It does not, however, refer to a mad and evil monarch, such as Vlad the Impaler, but to a disease: scrofula.

"Scrofula," from Latin "scrofa" meaning "sow," and the synonymous "struma" and "escrouelles" derive from the common appearance of the patient's enlarged neck. This is supposed to have caused the sufferers to have a pig-like appearance. "Morbus regius", "mal de roi" and the "King's Evil" are also synonyms for scrofula.

Scrofula is an enlargement of the cervical lymph nodes due to Tuberculosis or due to non-tuberculous (atypical) mycobacteria.

The differential diagnosis for neck swelling includes:

- * Cervical lymphadenopathy of any cause
 - * Extension of Primary Neoplasm (eg Pancoast)
 - * Goitre
 - * Branchial cyst, thyroglossal duct cyst
- Thus there are many possible causes of the appearances of Scorfula other than Tuberculosis.

Today the diagnosis can be made by diagnostic imaging and fine needle aspiration cytology and culture. Treatment of tuberculosis of the cervical nodes is by triple chemotherapy, choosing from Isoniazid, Rifampicin, Pyrazinamide and Ethambutol

The cause of scrofula was unknown until the late 19th century. Ancient Egyptians treated scrofula with surgery and dressings. Hippocrates advocated confinement to the temples of rest, praying, drinking milk, dieting and avoidance of extreme weather. Galen added gargles. The Chinese treatment was acupuncture.

In addition for many centuries it was believed that the condition could be cured by the Royal Touch and the giving of a coin by the King to the sufferer from scrofula.

Hence it was called the King's Evil. The Emperor Vespasian started the tradition of 'touch-pieces'. He is said to have

given coins to the sick at a ceremony known as the 'touching.' After the Romans had left England science went into abeyance. Anglo-Saxon medicine consisted of herbal remedies, leeches and amulets. The latter sometimes included coins.... Not usually their own coins which were very crude but more interesting coins from the late Roman period....such as those showing a Soldier spearing a fallen horseman (Figure 1, below.)



Figure 1. Bronze coin of Constantius Gallus showing a Soldier spearing a fallen horseman).

Legend has it that the healing power of the Kings of England and France dates back to King Clovis of France who was given this gift by St Remy in 496 AD. The gift of healing through touch, accompanied by the sign of the cross, is next mentioned in the reign of Robert the Pious (970-1031), second Capetian king, and touching specifically for scrofula is affirmed in the reign of his grandson Philip I (1060-1108).

The gift of healing is said to have first manifested itself in England in the hands of Edward the Confessor (born 1003, died 1066) (Figure 2 below)



Figure 2 Edward the Confessor from the Litlington Missal 1383 AD With permission (Copyright: Dean and Chapter of Westminster).

The kings and queens of England continued to touch patients and give a coin (called an Angel) to magically cure scrofula up until the civil war when Cromwell stopped the practice. Charles II restarted the touching ceremony and in his reign touched nearly 100,000 patients, giving each a gold coin, now called a touch piece rather than an Angel as the latter coin had gone out of usage. The image on it is of the Archangel Michael killing a dragon, symbolic of the



Figure 3, a James II gold touchpiece showing Archangel Michael killing a dragon)

devil, and this image is strikingly similar to the Roman coin of the soldier spearing the horseman. This similarity has not previously been noted by numismatists and the angel design presumably evolved from the earlier talismanic coin. (See Figure 3, a James II gold touchpiece).

James II continued the practice even after he was exiled. His son touched as James III, bonny Prince Charlie touched as Charles III and his brother, Cardinal Henry, touched as Henry IX. William and Mary stopped the ceremony but it was restarted by Queen Anne, who was the last reigning monarch do to so.

Scrofula and Touching by Royalty in the South West

Marie Trevelyan, in her book Glimpses of Welsh Life and Character states :
In 1666 we find a housewife noting...
"Heard this day how a man in Bristol came home cured of the Evil, the King having touched him"
Queen Anne had no desire to "Touch" but was persuaded to do so by her ministers. She visited Bath on August 29th 1702 and Bristol on September 3rd. Playing cards relating to these events do



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show her touching for the Evil and it is possible that she touched in both places. Samuel Werenfels wrote in his Dissertation Upon Superstition in Natural Things in 1749 about a Bristol labourer named Christopher Lovel.. "afflicted by the King's Evil set out from England in quest of relief. He applied to a certain, nameless, hereditary, unanointed Prince. He succeeded in his wishes, was miraculously cured returned home, relaps'd and died of the Struma at last."

Quackery

When the touching ceremony was stopped, as in the times of Oliver Cromwell, under William and Mary and after Queen Anne, other forms of 'treatment' would appear and become popular. Thus

faith healers would try their luck and various spas were promoted for their healing waters, including the healing of scrofula.

Pigot's Directory of Gloucestershire, 1830 tells us..

"The Hotwells are situated about one mile and a half westward from Bristol in the parish of Clifton. The salutary spring rises near the bottom of the cliff, and so copious as to discharge 60 gallons in a minute. The water is warm as milk, and like those of Bath, famous for the cure of stone and gravel, diarrhoea, diabetes, King's evil, scrofula and cancers."

A second hot spring was discovered in Hotwells further down river. This was also promoted as a treatment for Tuber-

culosis and when John Wesley in 1754 developed "Galloping Consumption" he tried the waters of both wells and preferred the new well. It now feeds a drinking fountain adjacent to the Portway. (Figure 4)

Conclusion

Touching for scrofula may have made the patient acceptable in society but it did not cure the disease. In fact, by making a contagious patient sociable it almost undoubtedly spread what it set out to cure.

References

- 1) Marie Trevelyan, Glimpses of Welsh Life and Character (Publisher: Carpenter Press Date Published: 2008)
- 2) Pigot's Directory of Gloucestershire, 1830



Figure 4. Professor Paul Goddard standing by the fountain on the Portway, Bristol fed by one of the Hotwells Springs