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History of ophthalmology

Ophthalmological quacks and mountebanks

Eighteenth century medicine was bedevilled by what the historian Harvey Graham calls a 'monstrous army of quacks and mountebanks.' The three most florid examples, a tinker, a tailor, and a poseur, were all in the field of ophthalmology.

Dr Roger Grant (former tinker), rose to the rank of royal oculist owing to his skill in restoring sight to dozens of blind peasants. History records that his only real skill was in bribing local clergymen – with suitable donations to church funds – to sign his (false) testimonials. Unsurprisingly, Queen Anne's eyesight always remained weak.

The tailor, William Read, was actually knighted for 'curing great numbers of soldiers of blindness,' most probably on similar therapeutic principles as Grant, whom he joined as second oculist to the Queen. Apparently the famous Cheselden made frequent disparaging remarks about both these gentlemen, as did the general public, who frequently sang the following verse in the coffee houses:

*Her Majesty, sure, was in a surprise,
Or else was very short-sighted,
When a tinker was sworn to look after her eyes
And the mountebank Read was knighted.*

The third 'quack ophthalmologist,' John Taylor, was the son of a Norwich surgeon, and even studied under Cheselden for a while. Taylor called himself 'the chevalier' (so much more catchy than doctor), dressed in black, and drove round in a magnificently ostentatious 'coach and four.' Dr Johnson thought him a prime example of 'how far impudence could carry ignorance.'

Taylor deliberately cultivated an obscure mode of speech, so as to appear more intelligent than his patients (some might say the profession still does so). An example survives: 'of the eye, on the wonders, lecture will I.' He also claimed to have more royal patients than were actually living, and to have treated Hugh Walpole (who nearly choked in outrage on hearing this –

rushing off to compose a series of stinging sarcastic denials). Cheselden, his former tutor, must have been cringing at his exploits. His claim to have treated Handel, however, was correct. Fortunately for the musical world, he did him no damage. And to his credit, Taylor is reported to have performed the first operation to cure squint, successfully cutting the interior rectus muscle in 1738.

Current concerns over plagiarism in research almost pale into insignificance compared with Read's bribing of dozens of soldiers to swear to his colleagues that they were formerly blind.

Grant, Read, and Taylor were lucky to evade punishment for their 'quackery.' Dr John Lambe was imprisoned by the College of Physicians for the same crime and, worse, was battered to death by the public on his release. Quacks who had killed a patient by giving the wrong drug treatment were committed to the tower. This evokes sentiments of 'there but for the grace of God . . .' except that overdoses of mercury and antimony was what they had in mind.

Other 'quacks' were placed in the pillory so that the public – even less polite than they are now – could throw mud and rotten eggs at them and generally abuse them.

Today, of course, all three would merely be struck off for malpractice, though Taylor, at least, would easily regain his fame and fortune in the sphere of public relations. Or possibly at Westminster.

FIONA ROMAN

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