

Chapter 1 : hunting for hippocrates | Download eBook pdf, epub, tuebl, mobi

A classical medical thriller, Hunting for Hippocrates is an intriguing change of pace from his first book, Boy's Pond. Presently, he is working on his third novel. Presently, he is working on his third novel.

This article has been cited by other articles in PMC. Abstract This article examines the process by which the London physician Thomas Sydenham (1624–1689) rose to fame as the English Hippocrates in the late seventeenth century. These sources reveal that in the first decades of his career Sydenham had few supporters and faced much opposition. However, by the end of the seventeenth century, Sydenham was the object of extraordinary outbursts of adulation and had become renowned for his decrying of hypotheses and speculative theory, his promotion of natural histories of disease, and the purported similarities between his medical method and that of Hippocrates. It was they who created the English Hippocrates. Here is the image of a man who is reputed to be the greatest physician of his age, the English Hippocrates, flanked by Inigo Jones and John Milton. Clearly by the mid-eighteenth-century, when this image of Sydenham was installed, his reputation was fully established. But what were the grounds upon which that reputation was founded? I am not concerned with the propagation and embellishment of that reputation down the centuries, that is, the creation of the two Sydenham societies, or the process by which Sydenham was transformed from being an opponent of what the College of Physicians stood for, to being one of its heroes. How then is a reputation created? One way is through the achievements of its bearer. Another way, often complementing the first, is through the promotion of a figure by his or her admirers, neophytes and descendants. I will argue that, in his day, Sydenham had relatively few achievements in any branch of medicine and that the creation of his posthumous reputation is largely owing to a small number of influential supporters, including John Locke. By the late seventeenth century, the reputation that Locke and others had created had at least three salient features: Sydenham the decrier of speculation; Sydenham the natural historian of disease; and Sydenham the Hippocratic physician. It was these facets of his posthumous reputation that made Sydenham the object of profuse adulation in the decades after his death. A catena of quotations from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries should set the scene. I will give the author, date and quote in that order: George Newman, [Sydenham] laid for all time the foundation of the practice of clinical medicine 4 Maurice Cranston, the greatest English physician 5 Kenneth Dewhurst, the greatest physician this country has ever produced 6 James Axtell, the leading doctor of his day 7 G. Rogers, probably the greatest physician of the age. It should also be pointed out, however, that the hagiographic tradition which they represent has not been without its objectors. We return then to the question as to how a reputation is created. In the case of Sydenham, does it rest on his achievements in medicine, his promotion by friends and admirers, or perhaps both? Sydenham before the Publication of *Observationes medicae* Sydenham moved to London from Oxford around and probably began practising medicine in the late 1650s. He received his licence to practise medicine in London from the College of Physicians on 25 June 1660. The one event of significance before the onset of that friendship was the publication of his *Methodus curandi febres* in 1661. First, it appeared immediately after the plague of 1665 and yet does not contain a discussion of that disease. Second, it lacks the kind of erudition found in the fevers literature of the period. Third, it shows no interest in, and little awareness of, the heated debates about the status of iatrochemistry, anatomy, phlebotomy and Galenism that were raging in London and in which Locke, Boyle and many of the virtuosi were embroiled in the mids. In fact, while the *Methodus* has been praised for its innovative emphasis on observation and decrying of speculative theory, 14 in comparison with the plethora of contemporary medical publications, its discussion of methodological issues, and especially the role of observation, is surprisingly muted. What it does contain is a highly speculative theory of fevers, which is almost certainly partially derived from the view of Thomas Willis. A notebook entry by John Ward from c. 1665. He also seems to have had trouble securing enough wealthy patients. Certainly that work reveals that he had faced opposition from within medical ranks. The only independent evidence of regular visits is a series of bills for medical receipts in late 1661 for a period of three months. Locke appears first to have encountered Sydenham in the spring of 1669 after his move from Oxford to the house of Anthony Ashley Cooper. Their relations were most intense from until early when Locke mentioned

to John Mapletoft that other concerns meant that he was unable to make visits to patients with Sydenham. In late 1687, Locke composed an adulatory poem about the second edition of *Methodus* which appeared in Meynell's edition. Meynell has convincingly argued that Locke had an important role in the major addition to the second edition, namely, a new chapter on the plague. During his convalescence, Ashley sought advice on the wisdom of retaining the short silver pipe which protruded from the wound in his side. Among the advice he received is a set of replies from Sydenham. For, as mentioned above, in 1687, Sydenham began to compose a work on smallpox dedicated to Ashley. Recent analysis of the surviving fragments of this work using computational stylistics has revealed that the dedicatory epistle and parts of the preface were composed by Locke. In Locke, Sydenham had found a real friend, someone who actively championed his cause and someone whose learning and connections were of great benefit to him. This is all the more interesting because of the quite striking differences between the medical orientation of the two men. From the late 1670s, Locke had been equipping himself as a physician. In many respects he was an autodidact, embarking on an extensive reading programme in all aspects of medicine. Yet he had some very expert guidance. It is not a repudiation of the investigative physiology he experienced just a few years before, 1682 nor is it a wholesale rejection of anatomy. It is a further indication of the sort of physician that Locke had become and this is decidedly different to the orientation of Thomas Sydenham. Sydenham had dealings with chymically inclined physicians such as Daniel Coxe, but he neither turned his hand to chymistry nor embraced a determinate matter theory. Moreover, at least since the 1670s, there had been a strong emphasis amongst British physicians on observation and experiment. More importantly, however, it is clear that in the late 1680s, Sydenham came to learn of the vogue amongst natural philosophers and physicians for the construction of Baconian-style natural histories. There is no mention of natural histories in either edition of the *Methodus* of 1687 and 1689, even though by this time the method of natural history had been widely promoted and practised by natural philosophers and physicians alike. Locke was in France for much of the latter half of the 1680s. To be sure, opposition continued, but over the next decade a small number of disparate supporters emerged within the medical fraternities of England and Scotland, one of whom – Charles Goodall – was to hold strategic positions within the College of Physicians. It may be that relations between Oldenburg and Sydenham had begun to thaw because in May 1688 he had Sydenham convey a package to Isaac Newton in Cambridge, and it was in Cambridge that Sydenham received a doctorate in medicine, on that very trip. Goodall, whose Leiden MD was incorporated at Cambridge in 1688, defended the College of Physicians in their skirmish with Adrian Huyberts in a short work entitled *The Colledge of Physicians Vindicated*, which was written in 1688 and published the following year. In it Goodall lists Sydenham as one of a group of eminent licentiates of the College. He goes on to refer approvingly to the section on plague in the second edition of the *Methodus*. Interestingly, he refers to the very material for which Meynell has shown that Locke was responsible, quoting a Latin extract which immediately follows criticism of Diemerbroek, to whom Goodall then refers. In a politically astute and carefully crafted history of the College of Physicians, Goodall lists Sydenham in a list of eminent English physicians. Here is how his eulogy begins, Dr Sydenham whom I can never name, without owning my great obligations for the many happy advantages which I have received from his most ingenious learned, and free conversation hath highly obliged the World, and all ingenuous Men of our Profession, with many incomparable Treatises, lately published; which are drawn as it were by another Hippocrates from his most exact and nice observation of Diseases, and their symptomes; to which are added most judicious, Natural Hypotheses, and Curative Indications, deduced from them; He hath given such an exact History of all acute Diseases from the beginning of 1679, to 1685. Second, it contains the first explicit comparison between Sydenham and Hippocrates, a comparison that would eventually lead to the epithet by which Sydenham is known today. It appears that this is how the book was received. Furthermore, the second edition of 1689 was published under the newly acquired imprimatur of the College of Physicians and contains a panegyric poem for Sydenham by Edward later Sir Hannes of Christ Church. He first lists the English physicians who supported Sydenham. Spon says of Sydenham, He printed about four or five years since his *Observations upon Acute Diseases*, wherein there are excellent methods for the cure of many Diseases; and of Fevers also, which he cures so perfectly, that at London he is called the Fever-Doctor; and yet for all this, we do not see that his method is much used. This was provided by John Locke. The starting point is the adulatory poem

recommending the second edition of the Methodus of I shall be glad to hear that it every day gains ground, though that be not always the fate of useful truth, especially at first setting out. I shall perhaps be able to give him an account of what some ingenious men think of it here. For example, Locke wrote to Mary Clarke on 9 March, I am exceedingly glad that the measles is so well over, which is a disease not without danger in the old way of tampering. I know if you had either Dr. Sydenham or Goodall they used neither hot remedies nor hot keeping, which is a rule I advise you to observe, if any of your children should have the same disease in the country. I have argued elsewhere that the salient methodological distinction in early modern natural philosophy is that between Experimental and Speculative Philosophy. This distinction is almost ubiquitous in late seventeenth-century England. The first of which, by Reason of the strange Alterations that have been made in it, may be again Subdivided into Speculative and Experimental. The Commonwealth of Learning, is not at this time without Master-Builders, whose mighty Designs, in advancing the Sciences, will leave lasting Monuments to the Admiration of Posterity; But every one must not hope to be a Boyle, or a Sydenham; and in an Age that produces such Masters, as the Great " Huygenius, and the incomparable Mr. How is this so? In answer to query four he informed him in August that: For with regard to the works of Mr Sydenham, we hold them in high esteem and it is certain that his plan and method are admirable, however, he is not always successful and that which he says of gonorrhoea is very weak, and one will surely very often be misled following his method. That which I always thought of Dr. Sydenham living, I find the world allows him now he is dead, and that he deserved all that you say of him. These are the two hallmarks of an experimental as opposed to a speculative philosopher in late seventeenth-century England, where Experimental Philosophy was still practised according to the Baconian method of natural history. I wonder that, after the pattern Dr. Sydenham has set them of a better way, men should return again to that romance way of physick. But I see it is easier and more natural for men to build castles in the air of their own, than to survey well those that are to be found standing. After an extended list of speculative physicians and their hypotheses, Baglivi tells us that: From at least the 1600s, Italian natural philosophers had embraced Experimental Philosophy and decried speculation. The preface to the Saggi di naturali esperienze of the Accademia del Cimento expressed the ambition of the Italian academy in terms that must have resonated with the English experimental philosophers, casting their work as a contribution to the vast project of natural history and expressing an aversion to speculation, We are unwilling any should imagine, That we pretend in this Publication, a Perfect Work; or in the least, an Exact Module of a large Experimental History; conscious to our selves, that more Time, and greater Abilities are necessary to so vast a Design " if sometimes, as a Transition from one Experiment to another, or upon what occasion soever, there shall be inserted any hints of Speculation, we Request they may be taken always for the thoughts, and particular sense of some one of the Members, but not imputed to the whole Academy, whose sole Design is to make Experiments and Relate them. His Essay was translated into both French and Latin in and, within four years of his death in 1703, a number of important posthumous writings had appeared. Herman Boerhaave famously praised Sydenham for being Hippocratic in his method in his public oration in 1700, when taking up a lectureship in medicine at Leiden: I would be ashamed to mention his name without a reverential epithet; whenever we contemplate him, the true image of the Hippocratic man is evoked in our mind, and however magnificently I may extol his merits for the Commonwealth of physicians, his worth will outdistance this praise. These passing comments shed light on the popular image of the long-deceased physician. Two good examples are found in the correspondence of James Jurin. First come those who, adding nothing to medicine of their own, are angry at the most trifling additions of another's. In another letter to Jurin from Edward Bayly in the following month, we find that with regard to collecting information on weather and the incidence of disease: Instead the reputation is spelled out in terms of his avoidance of speculation and his commitment to natural history.

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Warren J. Stucki is the author of Hunting for Hippocrates (avg rating, 9 ratings, 1 review, published), Boy's Pond (avg rating, 5 ratings.