MEDICAL LITERATURE IN LOUISIANA PRIOR TO THE ADVENT OF THE NEW ORLEANS MEDICAL AND SURGICAL JOURNAL

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Probably in order to appreciate what the New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal has meant to medicine in this section for the last hundred years it will only be necessary to point out just how scanty Louisiana was represented in the medical literature prior to the publication of this journal. Dr. Erasmus Darwin Fenner in making his appeal for support of a local medical periodical literature when he assumed co-editorship of the New Orleans Medical News and Hospital Gazette in 1857, made this statement as to what the New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal had meant to medicine in the South: “It is now nearly fourteen years since the first viable Medical Journal originated in the City of New Orleans .... To show what an impetus was then given to medical progress in the South, it is only necessary to state, that since that period, thirteen medical journals, five Medical Colleges, and numerous Medical Societies have sprung up in the Southern States.”

Prior to 1844 when the New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal began publication Louisiana is represented in the medical literature by approximately 17 pamphlets and reports, 31 journal articles and one short lived medical journal. Practically the entire subject matter of these early contributions had to do with the cause, treatment and prevention of yellow fever. Periodically after each epidemic, the physicians becoming conscience stricken, would make an effort to organize and investigate the cause of the latest epidemic. A report would frequently be issued and a few papers would appear, and then perhaps since habit was so strong, the same indifferent policy would assert itself and there would be a lapse in the appearance of any more publications for some time. Maybe since the pressure of caring for the sick was so great, the physician had little time to devote towards promoting a periodical literature. Whatever the reason very few physicians exerted themselves in writing, so that only about 37 physicians are represented in the literature as having recorded their experiences. Of this group only seven made more than one contribution. The most prolific of these was Dr. Edward Hal Barton, who is represented eight times. Drs. J. Baxter, M. Donnellan, N. V. A. Gérardin, Michel Halphen, J. W. Heustis, L. F. Thomas and P. F. Thomas, each made two contributions.

Writing in 1846, Dr. Bennett Dowler had this to say in regard to the unproductiveness of the medical men of this early period: “This golden age was poor in literature. Physicians grew gray in the most extensive practice, and left the theatre of their fame, for the ‘undiscovered country,’ without bequesting any scientific information for the benefit of posterity. Perhaps they believed as posterity had done nothing for them, they owed to it nothing.”

Of this early group of medical authors we know little. The best known is Dr. Barton, who came to Louisiana in 1820 after graduating from the Medical Department of the University of Pennsylvania, and settled in St. Francisville. Dr. Barton’s publications showed a scientific approach to medical problems far in advance of his time. He repeatedly emphasized that therapeutic measures must be based on observations drawn from their use, instead of theory. He strongly attacked the practices of that day, such as excessive bleeding, the administering of violent doses of emetics and cathartics, and the promiscuous use of calomel. He early became interested in the relationship between climatic conditions and the health of the population, and made the shrewd observation that following an average temperature of 80°F. during the summer for a two months’ period, an epidemic of yellow fever was sure to follow. He was instrumental in organizing the Medical
RAPPORT
FAIT À LA
SOCIÉTÉ MÉDICALE
SUR
LA FIEVRE JAUNE
QUI A KEGÉ
d'une manière épidémique
PENDANT L'ÉTÉ DE 1817,
PAR MM. GRÓS ET GERARDIN.

Non ignara mali, miseris succurrere disco.
Via. Enéide liv. 1.

Malheureuse, j'appris à plaindre le malheur.
Théât de Delille

NOUVELLE-ORLEANS :
IMPRIME PAR J. DE ST. ROMÉ, IMPRIMEUR DE LA SOCIÉTÉ MÉDICALE

AVRIL—1818.

Fig. 1. First report of the Société médicale de la Nouvelle-Orleans. Oldest extant medical item published in Louisiana.
REPORT

OF

THE COMMITTEE

OF

THE PHYSICO-MEDICAL SOCIETY

OF NEW-ORLEANS

ON THE

EPIDEMIC OF 1826.

PUBLISHED BY ORDER OF THE SOCIETY.

NEW-ORLEANS:

C. W. Dear, printer.

1821.

Fig. 2. Report of the Physico-Medical Society of New Orleans. The second medical society organized in Louisiana.
College of Louisiana, and at one time served as Dean. His last contribution was the report of the Sanitary Commission of which he was Chairman, and undoubtedly it was the disappointment over its poor reception by the physicians and the people of New Orleans who failed to appreciate its worth that caused his death.

Of the other medical authors we know little. Dr. Baxter seems to have been a resident of New York City, and only visited New Orleans to observe an epidemic of yellow fever. Dr. Donnellan, a native of Ireland, was licensed to practice medicine in the State in 1834, and while a resident gave us two case reports, one reported from Donaldsonville, and the other from Point Coupée. Dr. Gérardin, who with Dr. Gros, made the first report for the Société médicale, seems to have had only a brief career in Louisiana. He was granted his license to practice in Louisiana in 1817, and at one time was listed as a member of the Société médicale and also the Physico-Medical Society. Dr. Halphen, licensed in 1816, gave us two reports on the cholera epidemics of 1833 and 1835. His publications were made in the form of a report to the Royal Academy of Medicine of Paris. Dr. Heustis was a surgeon in the Army of General James Wilkinson, which was assembled in the City for its defense. His description of the epidemic which almost decimated the troops is the best authentic account published. Of Dr. L. F. Thomas nothing is known except that he gave us what is probably the best accounts of the epidemics which occurred in New Orleans in 1837 and 1841. Dr. P. F. Thomas, licensed in 1823, published one of the early monographs and served for a time as Secretary-General of the Société médicale. Since the other authors only contributed one paper and their literary career was of such brief duration, no mention will be made of them.

The publications of this early period fall into the following groups: the pamphlets, the reports, the journal articles and the one medical journal. In the development of early medicine in our country, the pamphlet played a particularly important role.

Since journals were so few it was only through a pamphlet issued as a rule at the author's own expense, that a physician could make known his own observations or experiences. The pamphlets issued at this time totaled 12. The subject matter of the majority dealt with the various epidemics of yellow fever which periodically visited the city. Cholera was treated in two; the medical topography of lower Louisiana in one; an epidemic of diarrhea and dysentery in one; temperance in its relationship to health by one; the relationship between climate and health in two, and the principles of medical practices in one. There were some rather keen observations made in these early pamphlets. Dr. Heustis made one of the first observations on the non-contagious character of yellow fever, but the greatest contribution was probably made by
Dr. Barton, whose plea for the practice of scientific medicine singled him out as a pioneer in re-introducing the principles of Hippocrates as the basis of medical practice. His use of vital statistics also showed him to be years ahead of his time.

There were five reports issued by the local medical societies of that time. The first two of these were issued by the Société médicale de la Nouvelle-Orléans on the epidemic of 1817, and were written by Drs. A. A. Gros, N. V. A. Gérardin, and J. G. Taillefer. After the epidemic of 1817 it became apparent to the physicians of New Orleans that some organized effort on their part was necessary if they wished to check in some measure the ravages of yellow fever. Accordingly, in 1818 the physicians of the city organized and a committee was appointed to investigate the cause of the epidemic the previous year. These two reports attributed the cause of the epidemic to the peculiar topography of New Orleans, abundant rains, excessive heat of the summer and the influx of strangers. The third report published in the state was also issued by the same society and was an attempt to cover the epidemic of 1819. There seems to have been nothing new added in this report as to the cause, treatment or prevention of yellow fever.

By 1820 a large number of English speaking physicians had settled in New Orleans and these physicians finding themselves out of place in a French speaking society organized their own society which was known as the Physico-Medical Society of New Orleans. One of the first acts of this society was to appoint a committee to make a report on the yellow fever epidemic of 1820. This report was very interesting and was probably the most scientific and the most honest of all the early reports. It began by describing the unsanitary conditions that prevailed, and went on to conclude that the committee was forced to admit that science had not yet found the means or remedy for combating and treating yellow fever.

Apparently the last report issued during this era was the one issued by the Physico-Medical Society of New Orleans in relation to the trial and expulsion of Dr. Charles A. Luzenberg from the society. Dr. Luzenberg, a brilliant scholar and an excellent physician, was in considerable difficulty at times over his inability to restrain his temper. This made him many enemies among his medical colleagues.

Although something like 31 articles appeared in journals only a few deserve mentioning. One of the characteristics of our early physicians was their pride in their city, and the one issue they would unite on was any criticism from a non-resident physician. Therefore, one of the first group of papers published was to defend their city from the criticisms of its unsanitary condition by Dr. Baxter, a resident of New York. One of the first papers dealing with diseases peculiar to the Southern negroes was written by Dr. Tidyman and was based on his observations in the Charity Hospital of New Orleans. Dr. Barton issued a paper on the use of vital statistics, and a Dr. Peck described the medical botany of Sicily Island, Louisiana. The other articles are probably of no very great consequences. The first articles were mostly published in the Medical Repository of New York. This was the first medical journal published in the United States. Later, Louisiana medicine was represented in the Philadelphia Journal of the Medical and Physical Sciences, American Medical Intelligence, Western Journal of the Medical and Physical Sciences, American Medical Recorder, American Journal of the Medical Sciences, the Transylvania Journal of Medicine, the New York Medical and Physical Journal and the Boston Medical and Surgical Journal. All of these journals were published in the East. Also many of the articles appeared in journals published in Paris, France.

An early attempt was made in 1839 by the members of the Société médicale de la Nouvelle-Orléans to publish a medical journal. A committee was appointed, composed of Drs. E. Fortin, J. Martin, and a Dr. Sabin and a Dr. Daret to investigate the possibility of publishing a journal and to serve as a publication committee. The so-
ciety succeeded in publishing a short-lived journal entitled, "Journal de la Société médicale de la Nouvelle-Orléans." This was the first journal published in the State. Unfortunately, the journal lasted less than a year, being discontinued either because of lack of interest or lack of funds. Copies are exceedingly rare, and no library, as far as can be ascertained, has the complete file.

This, then, is Louisiana's contribution to medical literature during these formative years. If in most cases the papers failed to make any scientific contribution to medicine they at least showed the independent spirit and ingenuity which the pioneer physician displayed in attempting to meet the problems with which he was constantly confronted.

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of this character encompasses territory in which there is room for differences of interpretation, and a thoughtful reader will find added zest in the challenge by these differences.

Harold Cummins, Ph. D.

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