

# News, Notes and Queries

## A DESCRIPTION OF *CLOSTRIDIUM HISTOLYTICUM* GAS-GANGRENE IN THE EPIDEMICS OF HIPPOCRATES

NEUBURGER (1910) points out that in the *Corpus Hippocraticum* the classification of disease by the salient features has led to a lumping together of heterogeneous conditions. It is by no means certain that the condition described in *Epidemics III*, ch. iv, is homogeneous, but the description seems clear enough to justify a diagnosis of *Clostridium histolyticum* gas-gangrene in some of the cases.

The condition occurred mainly in spring and less frequently in summer and autumn; it was initiated by trivial accidents or very small wounds which led to erysipelas (έρυσιπελας), which is here taken to mean a non-specific, hot, yellowish-red swelling of the skin. Some of these were no doubt cases of subcutaneous septic infections, as is suggested by fact that cases that ended in suppuration recovered, even when there was extensive destruction of flesh, sinews and bone.

But in some the flux which formed was not like pus (ἦν δὲ καὶ τὸ ῥεῦμα τὸ συνιστάμενον οὐ πύφιν κελον), but another kind of putrefaction with a copious and varied flux (ἀλλὰ σηπεδῶν τις ἄλλη καὶ ῥεῦμα πολὺ καὶ ποικίλον), and whenever the inflammation and erysipelas disappeared without suppuration there were many deaths. This is more like gas-gangrene due to clostridial infection, though admittedly there is no reference to crepitus in the tissues. The fact that in some cases entire limbs were lost and in others bones were bared of flesh (πολλοῖσι μὲν γὰρ βραχίων καὶ πῆχυς ὅλος περιερρύη . . . οἷσι δ' ὅλος ὁ μηρὸς ἢ τὰ περὶ κνήμην ἀπεψιλοῦτο καὶ ποὺς ὅλος) suggests that *Clostridium histolyticum* was the infecting organism. Similar lesions can readily be produced in experimental animals by intramuscular injection of cultures of this organism. If the diagnosis is correct, this is the first known description of this condition.

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### REFERENCES

- HIPPOCRATES (1923), translated by W. H. S. Jones, Loeb Classical Library, London and New York, Vol. I, pp. 241-2.  
NEUBURGER, M. (1910), *History of Medicine*, Oxford, I, 154.

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## A NOTE ON THE MEDICAL USE OF SALT IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY AFRICA

THE use of sodium chloride to prevent and overcome the symptoms of heat exhaustion and heat cramp is firmly established in contemporary medical practice and derives its rationale from modern biochemistry and physiology. The physician who employs sodium chloride in this way bears in mind what he has learned about electrolytes, millilitres and milliequivalents. His mental climate is one of modernity and efficiency, and he is apt to suppose that the sodium chloride treatment is the result of comparatively recent advances in science.