RHEUMATOLOGY IN HISTORY

Rheumatism in the early 18th century: a doctor’s diary

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History never feels so true as when told by those having experienced it themselves. By chance we found the diary of a doctor, living around the turn of the 17th century. Dr Michiel Korsten was born in 1666 in a small Flemish village and kept a diary from 1702 until his death in 1732 at age 66. You will look in vain for intellectual contents in his notes. In contrast, this “bourgeois” man described trifling events and small talk about the middle class and the clergy of his time Leiden housed one of the most famous faculties of medicine in Europe. Young Michiel Korsten stayed there at Mr Van Velthoven’s home, a rich merchant from his own native village. For board and lodging he paid 200 guilders a year. The diary he had to pay 40 guilders a year for chemistry, 20 guilders “to be taught about herbs”, 20 guilders for “anatomy and to watch separation of the parts of the body”, 20 guilders for the courses of principles “to listen and write down chemistry, surgery and herbs”, and 40 guilders a year for the practical lessons, in the famous Leiden teaching hospital. The diary tells that it was common practice among the students to assume a poor appearance in order to obtain a reduced price for the courses. Only one year later, in May 1691, he left Leiden to continue his medical training at the University of Louvain. For board and lodging at a local pharmacist’s he paid 320 guilders a year. Only seven months later he graduated as a doctor. According to his own calculations, his studies had cost 300 guilders, excluding the costs of boarding and lodging. After having finished his studies he didn’t know where to settle. In 1696, he finally started as a general practitioner in Sint-Truiden, a Flemish town in the region where he was born. In 1706, he moved to Maaseik, a town in the same province, where he lived and practised until his death. There he was also engaged on May 11, 2002 by guest. Protected by copyright. Ann Rheum Dis 2002, 61:468–469

SYNTAXIS ET POETICA

The diary starts with memories of his medical education. After having finished “Grammatica, Syntaxis et Poetica” at the school of the Jesuits in Liege, he first followed an additional course “Logica et Physica”. In 1690, at the age of 24 years, he started to study medicine at Leiden University in Holland. At that time Leiden housed one of the most famous faculties of medicine in Europe. Young Michiel Korsten stayed there at Mr Van Velthoven’s home, a rich merchant from his own native village. For board and lodging he paid 200 guilders a year. The courses in medicine he attended were for the greater part private and were given at the professor’s house. According to his diary he had to pay 40 guilders a year for chemistry, 20 guilders “to be taught about herbs”, 20 guilders for “anatomy and to watch separation of the parts of the body”, 20 guilders to attend surgical procedures, 20 guilders for the courses of principles “to listen and write down chemistry, surgery and herbs”, and 40 guilders a year for the practical lessons, in the famous Leiden teaching hospital. The diary tells that it was common practice among the students to assume a poor appearance in order to obtain a reduced price for the courses.

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We wonder if this ignorance was a shortcoming in his personal knowledge or if the link between alcohol and gout was not yet recognised at that time.

Already Hippocrates had observed “castrates and women before menopause never have podagra”, but mentioned “the Greek who drive horses are prone to this disease”. We are inclined to associate the possession of a horse with a richer lifestyle predisposing to more abundant use of alcohol. It was Boerhaave (1668–1738), a contemporary of Dr Korsten and teaching at Leiden University who wrote in aphorism number 1255 “generous drinks too abundant, a copious body and heredity” were associated with gout. Boerhaave was appointed in Leiden in 1705 and the aphorisms were published in 1708.

As for the treatment of gout, Dr Korsten was well aware of the recommendations of his time. Consistent with the “theory of humours”, we read in *Tractatus de Podagra et Hydropia* by Thomas Sydenham (1624–1689): “There are about three ways proposed, whereby we may eject the containing cause of the gout: bleeding, purging and sweating”. This is exactly what Dr Korsten did, to treat not only his gout but all his health problems. He prepared the sweating drink himself and meticulously noted the type and dose of herbs he used. He often added “Laudanum Opiatum”, apparently a more efficient pain reliever than sweating. Each course of sweating took five to eight days. During these treatment courses he drank water abundantly, which he ordered from a local fountain well, said to have healing properties. Remarkably, his notes on the drug treatment and their effects are written in Latin and so we read “etiam bene sudabant cum bono effectu consequentes”.

When sweating and purging were insufficient, Dr Korsten tried to find relief in bleeding. In 1722 he twice went to a local surgeon and was treated by bleeding, first seven “ounces” (one ounce at that time was 31.25 gram) and soon afterwards nine. As the attacks of gout continued, he decided to go to Aachen, in the present Germany, to be treated by “cupping”, a different method of bloodletting (fig 1). The total course, including 11 “blood-cups” on different parts of the body, cost 20 guilders. This without any success, because when arriving home he immediately started a treatment course of sweating, which finally stopped the attack. In May 1726 he travelled a second time to Aachen, to take baths and to be treated by cupping. This time the costs were only 7 guilders because he travelled with acquaintances who did not charge him for the journey. Smaller attacks of gout did not need systemic treatment but were relieved effectively by local “sweating plasters”. Interestingly, he fought an episode of “sciatica” by “whipping my bottom with nettles”. A more civilised remedy was used when he suffered from kidney stones, which were successfully driven out by drinking oil of turpentine on three mornings.

**THE END OF THE DIARY**

From 1728 onward the descriptions of his health problems are less vivid and more and more he mentions a deterioration of his general condition. The diary ends in 1730 when he wrote “Slowly I am travelling to my grave, may God be merciful to my soul.” Two years later, in 1732, Michiel Korsten died.