Dr John Caius, 1510–1573

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Anniversaries of births and deaths are rightly welcomed as occasions to remind us of famous men and their achievements. On the 29th day of July 1573 there died Dr John Caius, who is remembered with gratitude by the Royal College of Physicians of London and by Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. The persuasive and inexorable Editor of the Journal has decreed that I should write a note on Caius’s contributions to medicine. The phrase ‘contribution to medicine’ usually suggests the discovery of the cause or cure of some disease or the promulgation of some basic general law in medicine, but it is given to very few doctors to achieve such successes. The sad fact is that there are not enough really important discoveries to go round. On the other hand, valuable contributions to medicine in the widest sense can be made in many other ways. Although Caius has no eponymous disease or syndrome, or even sign, he did make a number of significant contributions which in sum entitle him to our respectful admiration.

First, his writings. His own list (*De Libris Propriis*, London, 1570) records seventy-two titles, which include sixteen original works. There were also seven versions from Greek into Latin, ten commentaries, and various classical texts, discovered, edited or emended. The majority of these works no longer exist, so we cannot judge them. Of the medical books, the best known and most important is *A Boke, or counseill against the disease commonly called the sweate, or sweatynge sickness* (London, 1552). *De Medendi Methodo* (Basel, 1544) is a compilation mainly based on the work of Galen and Montanus, the latter having been one of Caius’s teachers, but is claimed by its author to include original observations of his own. His editions of Galen and his notes on Hippocrates and Galen are contributions, but cannot be regarded as notable ones. Like many sixteenth-century physicians, Caius had wide general learning. He wrote on zoology (*De Canibus Britannicis*, London, 1570 and *De Variorum Animalium . . .*, London, 1570), the classics (*De Pronunciatione Graecae et Latinae Linguae . . .*, London, 1574 and notes on Aristotle and the Itinerary of Antoninus) and theology (on the Epistle of St Jude, St Chrysostom’s *De Modo Orandi Deum* and Erasmus’s *Ratio Verae Theologiae Methodus*). Sadly, his longest work (*De Antiquitate Cantabrigiensis Academiae*, 1574) is also by general consent his least valuable. This book, of vast and misapplied learning, is a reply to one Thomas
Key (who was no relation) of All Souls College, Oxford, who had claimed that his university had been refounded by Alfred the Great about A.D. 870. Caius, no doubt stung by this incorrect and indeed outrageous assertion, proceeded to prove that Cambridge had been founded by Cantaber in 394 B.C., over twelve centuries before Oxford. Caius may be excused for his loyalty to Cambridge. The foundation controversy had originated in the fertile brains of mediaeval annalists, had included some notable forgeries on both sides, and was to continue into the eighteenth century. De Antiquitate . . . , described by Sir George Clark as 'cheerfully fabulous', does at least show that Caius was familiar not only with Latin and Greek, but also with Hebrew and Anglo-Saxon.

The book on the sweating sickness was first published in English in 1552 'onely for English men not lerned' and four years later in a Latin version (De Ephemera Britannica) 'for men of lerning more at large and generally for the help of them which hereafter should have need'. It was the first book to be published in this country describing a single disease in detail. The sweating sickness remains a mystery, but was clearly a well-defined epidemic disease which struck Britain on five occasions between 1485 and 1551. The first appearance of the disease in England is thought to have coincided with Henry Tudor's landing at Milford Haven on 6 August 1485. It soon spread to London. Later epidemics affected areas as far apart as Radnorshire, Kent, and Yorkshire. Epidemics also occurred in central Europe, from Russia down to Switzerland and the Low Countries, but, curiously, not in France till 1717. The last recorded outbreak was in France in 1906.

Caius writes in the diffuse and wordy style then fashionable, with many allusions and comparisons. He describes clearly the symptoms—sweating, vomiting, diarrhoea, pains in the trunk and limbs, headache, delirium, mental changes and drowsiness. There was then no physical examination other than study of the pulse. Apart from the conspicuous sweating, the description would do well for the epidemic influenza of modern times. Discussion of the causes leads, as it must in a new and unknown disease, to no more than a few desperate shots. For treatment, a varied and generous diet is advocated, and the medication recommended includes over fifty drugs for internal and external use. Suggestions for prevention comprise a number of sound general hygienic measures, such as fresh air, clean water, clean clothes, removal of excreta, avoidance of draughts, bed-rest, and advice not to try to resist the disease. It is of interest that the disease is mentioned by Shakespeare. Mistress Overdone, the bawd in Measure for Measure, complains 'Thus, what with the war, what with the sweat, what with the gallows and what with poverty, I am custom-
shrunk'. The scene of the play is, of course, set in Vienna, where there was an epidemic in 1529.

That learned but eccentric writer Charles Creighton in *A History of Epidemics in Britain* (2nd edition, London, 1965) adds some interesting facts about the sweat. It affected the well-to-do as well as the poor, which accounts in some degree for the wide attention that the epidemics attracted. In 1485 two Mayors and four Aldermen died, as well as the Abbot of Croyland. In some of the epidemics the disease was particularly lethal. In 1528, ten thousand victims
perished, and in the 1517 outbreak some of those afflicted died in a few hours. Although Creighton confirms most of Caius’s observations, he goes on to describe them as ‘better than nothing at all, but too much occupied with pedantry and lugubrious rhetoric to be of much service for historical purposes’ and as ‘generalities which amount to no more than a funereal essay, in the scholastic manner, upon the theme of sudden death’. All this is less than fair to an author who is writing in the contemporary style of three centuries before.

Another of Caius’s contributions was to the study of practical anatomy. The Barber-Surgeons’ Company, founded in 1387, had since 1540 had the right to make dissections, but it was the College of Physicians that provided the anatomical teaching. Caius began lectures and demonstrations to the surgeons after his return from Italy about 1545, and continued this instruction for nearly twenty years. He had lived at Padua in the same house as Vesalius for eight months and was a friend of Conrad Gesner, so it may be assumed that (although he did not see eye to eye with Vesalius) he had some knowledge of and interest in morphological studies. In 1564, just after Caius’s second period as President, and probably at his instance, the College obtained from Queen Elizabeth a charter which allowed the public dissection of four bodies annually. This was wisely confined to the cold winter months. Surgical lectures were given in the College from 1569. Such was the impetus of these anatomical studies that in 1581 Dr Richard Caldwell and Lord Lumley founded the Chirurgical Lecture, now known as the Lumleian Lecture. Also, the Goulstonian Lecture, founded in 1632, was to be given, if possible, on a dead body dissected to illustrate the diseases under discussion. It should be added that when Caius introduced dissections at his College in Cambridge, he laid down that the teacher was to ensure that the students treated the body with respect. When the dissection was over, there was to be a burial attended by the teacher and all students, and with as much respect as if the body were that of some important person. Strangely, the rule was not based on any ideas of religion or human dignity, but to show gratitude for the advantages gained from the dissection.

The earliest known statutes of the College contain a section *De Examinacionum Forma* in which are described in detail the exacting standards required for admission. First, there were four separate examinations to be taken at intervals of three months, the first on the theory of medicine, the second on the symptoms and signs of disease, the third on methods of treatment, and the fourth on materia medica. For each subject, texts of Galen and Hippocrates were prescribed, seventeen lengthy volumes in all. The fifth and final part of the examination was on the practice of medicine. At least five Fellows were to be present, and the statute exhorted them to be severe. It is true that the examination statute was first drawn up in 1541 or 1542 during the presidency of
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Made by Iohn Caius
docour in phisick.

Very necessary for evrye
personne, and muche requi-
site to be had in the handes
of al sortes, for their better
instruction, preparation, and
defence, against the loud-
dyeing compung, and fear-
ful assauleynge of the
same disease.

1592.
Edward Wotton and when Caius was in Italy, but in 1555 the statutes were, in the words of Sir George Clark, 'reduced to order, augmented and completed by Caius' and 'bear very distinctly the stamp of Caius's personality'. It is difficult not to conclude that he played a part in planning the examinations, which must be among the earliest in the country. It is true that the mediaeval universities imposed some sort of examination tests, but these were disputations which degenerated over the years to empty forms. It is painful for an Oxonian to have to record that at his own university it became the custom for the candidate to entertain his examiners on the evening before the test in such a way that an alcoholic hangover precluded any serious questioning on the following day. At one time there were only five possible questions for disputation, and in most colleges the porter could provide the questions and the usual answers. There were no examinations in the modern sense of the word at Oxford until 1800. Thus, the College of Physicians leads by 350 years. 

Thorough in all that he undertook, it is not surprising that Caius was a strict disciplinarian. It is no accident that the section De Statutis Moralibus seu Penalibus is by far the longest in the statutes. During Caius's presidency in 1562 a rule was made that any Fellow who resisted or even questioned the statutes was to be expelled for ever from the College, and this penalty was exacted on several occasions. So that there should be no doubt in the minds of the Fellows about their obligations, the penal statute was read out in full at every Comitia, but out of regard for the feelings of the Fellows, in the 1563 revision of the statutes the word 'penal' was replaced by the word 'ethical'. It may be noted that the educational equipment of Gonville and Caius College in Caius's time as Master included a set of stocks for the correction of both undergraduates and graduates. 

Caius's last contribution was his unceasing fight to maintain standards, by proceeding against irregular practitioners and imperfectly qualified medical men. He appeared before the Lord Mayor of London to argue that surgeons should not be allowed to administer inward remedies, and he succeeded. Another famous episode was the rejection by the College of Simon Ludford and David Lawton (or Laughton) as being ignorant of medicine, philosophy, and the liberal arts. Indeed, Lawton, whose previous occupation had been coppersmith, on being asked to decline 'corpus' answered 'hie, haec, hoc corpus'. This was bad enough, but when, only two years later, the University of Oxford admitted both men as Bachelors of Medicine Caius was roused to action as well as to righteous indignation. He wrote a stiff letter to the Vice-Chancellor and Convocation protesting at the university's action and calling for its reversal. The condescending rejection of his demand only spurred him
to further efforts. He persuaded the commissioners then inquiring into reform at the universities to take up the matter, with the result that Oxford was formally rebuked. No more was heard of Lawton, but Ludford, prevented from achieving an Oxford doctorate, then tried at Cambridge. Protests by Caius and other eminent Cambridge alumni seem to have defeated his attempt there as well. Strangely, ten years after his rejection by the College, Ludford, who somehow managed after all to become an Oxford Doctor of Medicine, became a Fellow of the College, actually during Caius's presidency, and later served as Censor on three occasions.

As the scope of the present article is limited to 'contributions to medicine', reference to Caius's many other important activities has purposely been omitted. In respect of his medical work alone, well may we salute the memory of this man of achievement.

It will be plain to the reader that this article makes no claim to originality, but is based on such sources as Munk's Roll, Sir George Clark's History of the College, Dr John Venn's Memoir, Mr E. S. Roberts's Works of John Caius, Dr. C. D. O'Malley's English Medical Humanists, and the Dictionary of National Biography. I am grateful to Sir George Clark, Mr Leonard Payne, Dr A. H. T. Robb-Smith and Dr Nicholas Richardson for advice and help, and to Mrs Morag Engel for the photographs.

Rules of Health

Sanctorius of Padua was one of those medical worthies whose aphorisms survived edition after edition. They were published in English by John Quincy (1712), an apothecary who lamented that the name apothecary 'has the misfortune to sound but indifferently with those who very much value themselves upon academic advantages'.

Sanctorius was hooked on sweating, declaring that the 'physician who has the care of the health of Princes and knows not what they daily perspire deceives them and will never be able to cure them unless by accident'. He had an aphorism to cover most situations. 'Swimming in cold water after violent exercise is very delightful but fatal. Moderate dancing without jumping comes the nearest of anything to the advantages of walking; for it leisurely expells the digested perspirable matter. He destroys himself that eats once a day besides his ordinary meals, be it more or less.' His views on sex come in a curiously unpunctuated form. 'Immoderate coition next to the stomach is most hurtful to the eyes.'