

Medicine, Pioneer Style, 1825*

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More than a hundred years ago there was published at Versailles, Kentucky, a most amazing medical book—a heterogeneous conglomeration of scientific terms, personal philosophy, and recipes for herb medicines. The author, a self-styled physician, was Richard Carter; and the printer—who executed the volume surprisingly well for the year 1825 in the wilderness—was John H. Wilkins of the Commonwealth Office. The title of the book reads in part: “A Valuable, Vegetable, Medical Prescription, with a Table of Detergent and Corroborant Medicines to Suit the Treatment of the Different Certificates”—these certificates being affidavits in favor of Doctor Carter’s remarkable and versatile healing.¹

Viewed as a whole, the contents of this exhausting book are somewhat reminiscent of Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, though of course as far as literary style is concerned it is blasphemous to mention Burton’s classic and Doctor Carter’s “yarb book” within the same paragraph.

The latter begins with a long harangue on the inevitability of death—obviously Doctor Carter is preparing his patients for the worst if it should come—and then, as though foreseeing that some day a special article would be written about him, he obligingly set forth an autobiographical sketch.

Richard Carter was born on the South Branch of the Potomac River in Virginia, July, 1786, the son of a half-Indian woman and an Englishman who had been “regularly bred to the practice of physic in London” but who, after coming to America, had been crippled and forced to exchange his profession for the sedentary work of a shoemaker in order to support his wife and two children.

Of his childhood Richard Carter regrets only that he did not receive harder and more frequent beatings, for—he observes—many a man is saved the hangman’s noose by being properly trained in youth. He especially ridicules the discipline of a mild Virginia schoolmaster who merely made

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¹ A copy of Dr. Carter’s medical book is owned by Mrs. Roy Smiley of Washington, Indiana.

young Dick, for being naughty, stand on a block and point at a hole in the wall for an hour or two! There is nothing like stripes to develop character, according to Doctor Carter.

Indeed, during adolescence, his own character suffered from his too often "kissing black-betty"—a subtle way of admitting that he drank too much liquor. However, he finally pulled himself together and set out to see the world.

After covering most of Virginia, he returned home, entered school once more, and began to take learning seriously. When he had exhausted the local teachers—probably not a very difficult task—he went to visit an uncle living near Marietta, Ohio. There he studied botany and "herbology" under an Indian doctress "reputed uncommonly skillful." Next he studied under an Indian man, an authority on pulsation, the healing of wounds, and the cure of "cronick complaints"! Lastly he topped off his education by reading his father's medical books—so diligently that he almost lost his eyesight. No doubt this study accounts for his partly scientific or at least pseudo-scientific vocabulary.

From the period of preparation to his establishment as a successful practicing physician in Garrard County, Kentucky, no transition is attempted. The book jumps immediately to a series of affidavits that are always long in praise of Doctor Carter and often scathing in comment on his medical colleagues. Strangely enough, these numerous affidavits are usually signed and attested by the same two dozen people. Here is a sample:

[Paint Lick] Garrard County, Kentucky

I do certify that in the year of our Lord 1810 I was taken with the dropsy and became very low. I sent for a doctor and mended a little, but never left me but still grew worse for two years. I then applied to Doctor R. Carter, who gave me medicine from which I recruited very much, so that I thought I was well, but it returned again and swelled all over my system. It appears that there was no chance for my recovery; even my eyes were swelled like bladders of water, and my feet and legs swelled to that degree that they burst and ran a great deal. Then Doctor Carter began to administer medicine to me again . . . and he continued to give me medicine until I became sound and well, and have not taken any of his medicine for about thirteen months, during which time I have been perfectly well. When I commenced taking medicine of Doctor Carter I was about fifty years of age, and since that I have had a fine daughter. . . . I have visited Eliza Lasure, whom Doctor Carter attended on, and who was given out to die by all of the family with whom she lived, so that I sent for

her parents to come and see her die; but Doctor Carter came and attended on her, by which she got immediate relief and soon got well. Likewise another young woman at the same house, by the name of Sarah Silvy, was in a deplorable condition, so that she would die away with fits, and for a long time there would be no appearance of life. Doctor Carter attended on her also, and she soon got well. Given under my hand this 6th day of March 1817. Sarah Lasure

Attest: Henry Rogers, Nathaniel Lewis, Cassander Lewis, John Wolfscale, Richard Wright, Fanny Lewis, Samuel Lewis.

Now let us quote Doctor Carter himself in respect to that same case of Sarah Lasure. As is frequently his habit, he presents his report in verse:

A Few Lines of Poetry Composed on the Above Complaint

This woman aged fifty years
The dropsy had, as it appears;
Who was laid low and almost gone,
Until her legs did burst and run.

While at the point of death she lay
Without the hope of the next day,
Then by God's blessing and my skill
She was restored, sound and well.

Observe the means which I did give
Has almost made the dying live,
And from affliction now has *freed*
And made this aged woman *breed*.

But dropsy was not the only disease that Doctor Carter could put to rout. He was equally successful in treating tuberculosis and cancer—if we may believe his affidavits and his case reports:

This woman was brought low and weak,
Consumpted so she scarce could speak;
But by my simple means and skill,
She is restored sound and well;
Likewise she had a cancer too,
With which she knew not what to do;
But by the means which I prepare
She nothing has now but the scar.

Doctor Carter's prescriptions for two such serious maladies as consumption and cancer may well be included here. For consumption, the patient was to "get unslaked lime and put it in water until the water becomes slippery; into a gallon of which you must deposit a little bag containing dried ground-ivy leaves, horehound roots pulverized, sweet annes seed beat

fine, and a tablespoonful of English rosin. Take three tablespoonfuls a day in a little new milk and keep to a light cooling diet." The doctor also reports that the lye of hickory saplings "has done wonders" for weak lungs and phthisic. Furthermore, "the patient will do well to take a new-laid egg every morning on a fasting stomach, well mixed with a gill of new milk and half as much fresh spring water, a little loaf sugar, and a little wine."

For cancer, Doctor Carter suggests a salve to be made from pennyroyal, camomile flowers, mullein, and one-half gallon of apple vinegar. After this mixture has been boiled twenty-four hours, we must add salt and a gill of honey; then we are to simmer the mixture down to a salve—which is to be applied to the cancer with a feather. The salve is to be supplemented by Tereton's drops and later by a wash containing "lapiscalaminaris, salmonic, corrosive sublimate, and lunarcostic, in a pint of strong wine." To the pioneer Kentucky physician, it would seem, cancer presented almost no problem, at all!

Concerning yaws—"which negroes like to have in order to escape labor"—Doctor Carter observes: "The ailment never spreads by miasma floating in the air but by physical contact." His prescription is blue stone or blue vitrol.

He also has a treatment for diabetes—a curable disease, he believed, in its first stages. He recommends alum—as much alum as can be held on the point of a case knife in a gill of new milk three times a day. Other medicines for diabetes are elixer of vitrol, jesuits' bark, and good wine.

His discussion of cataracts is likewise memorable. First of all, Doctor Carter defines a cataract as being "a membrane in the posterior chamber of the aqueous humor or inspissated pus floating in the aqueous humor." Such cataracts proceed from diseases of the stomach, but treatment should begin by repeated burning of the shins with caustic! Meanwhile eye-water of white vitrol and sugar of lead will be helpful. A related disorder, *gutta serena*, or palsy of the optic nerve, is treated thus: "Give pukes and cup temples."

All the preceding remedies, however, are pale in comparison with this one:

For Gout, Rheumatism, Cramps, and Weak Nerves

Kill the fattest young dog that you can get, in the month of March or April; clean him as you would a pig; gut him; and stuff his belly

with a pint of red fishing worms, a pint of red pepper, a considerable portion of the bark of the root of sassafras, and water frogs; then sew up the incision, roast the dog well, and save the oil to annoint sores, gouts, weak nerves, etc.—guarding against getting wet and exposure of every kind.

Then he blithely follows with another, of which the title is most amusing:

For Old Running Sore Legs

Press the juice out of ripe elderberries and boil it down to the consistency of molasses; then take a tablespoonful of the same, night and morning inwardly, and apply salve (quick silver, aquafortis, tar, and lard) to the sore, abstaining from the use of bacon, cider, spirits, etc. This treatment has cured distressed sore legs and even the consumption when it was entered in the second stage. It is good to keep the bowels open and to cool inward fevers.

Probably the climax of all Doctor Carter's prescriptions is reached in the apparently popular and frequently referred to remedy "for billious, nervous, and putrid fevers, and the pleurisy." Here is the unbelievable remedy:

Receipt the 57th

Get a double handful of the bark of the roots of dogwood, a handful of ground ivy, a handful of mullein roots, and a handful of the bark of the roots of sassafras; boil them all well together in water, strain the sirup and put it in a vessel to itself, and then get a quart of good clean cow dung and put it in a tight little linen bag and boil it well in water; then strain it with the other sirup, boil it down to a quart, bottle it, and add a teaspoonful of refined nitre.

And this concoction was recommended to purify the system and to increase the appetite!

Notwithstanding the foregoing preoccupation with physical ailments, Doctor Carter also treated mental abnormalities. He discussed hysteria at some length—pointing out that women are subject to hysteria and men to "hypos" or attacks of hypochondria. Both disorders amount to the same thing and require the same treatment: letting blood flow freely from the foot, having agreeable company, bathing feet before going to bed, and taking three grains each of calomel and aloes followed by castor oil. Gold filings taken night and morning in honey or bear's gall with rum were also recommended as helpful.

If the cause of a woman's hysteria happened to be jealousy, Doctor Carter gave her this advice: "Make as good a trade of a bad bargain as you can, and give your husband

good words. See how honey will gather flies and vinegar drive them away."

Another type of hysteria is described in the case of an old dame who complained of a cold head. "As a remedy she wore a cap, three handkerchiefs, and a bolster of feathers on it; and yet she complained it was cold." For once, Doctor Carter admits that he did not have any great success in treating her.

Similarly, as a typical example of a hypo, there is a description of a man who thought his stomach contained a shoemaker and a complete set of shoemaker's tools. In this case a satisfactory cure resulted from some clever chicanery on the part of the physician. First the patient was blindfolded and "given a thorough puke." Next, timed with each exertion of the patient's vomiting, a tool was dropped on the floor. Finally a naked boy was likewise dropped on the floor. Then the patient, after being permitted to see the remarkable disgorgement, felt perfectly normal and happy once more.

Strangely enough, Doctor Carter considered lockjaw, epilepsy, cramps,, St. Vitus' dance, and nervous "cholic" all as phases of that same hypochondriasis. Nervous "cholic," for instance, or "wind in the blood," is caused by sudden heats and cold, coffee, hard drinking, or sitting up too late!

Other amusing observations of the frontier physician are too numerous for more than random and deleted quotation: "If worms and teething both meet in one child, it causes a more stinking breath;" "Whatever is contrary to nature in the patient ought to be removed;" "If any application is likely to do more hurt than good, it should be abandoned;" "In gardening ne'er this rule forget—to sow when dry but set when wet;" "The calls of nature should never be postponed. Delicacy is a virtue, but that which induces persons to risk their health or hazard their lives cannot be deemed a genuine virtue."

The volume, just two pages short of five hundred, draws to a close with an Indian lexicon, a glossary of scientific terms, some models for aspiring young letter writers, a list of Doctor Carter's eight students—one of whom, Issac Westerfield, was extremely promising after four months of study—and a series of essays on God, Man, and the Devil.

A single excerpt from the essay on Adam is—despite the vague pronouns—too good to be passed over: "When God called on Adam, he laid it [the blame for sinning] on the

woman, the woman on the serpent, and he—a sly, cunning old dog—pretended to be speechless: he had no one else to cast the blame on.”

Of course, in looking back over the old medical book, we laugh and label Doctor Carter as something little short of Quack; yet for his time and opportunities he no doubt did as well as we can have any right to expect. There is even something heroic about his precept that “in mortal diseases it is better to employ uncertain remedies than to abandon the patient to certain death.” He probably saved the lives of a few patients and killed several others, but to many he must have brought at least some mental comfort.

Furthermore, he was not superstitious—he would have nothing to do with charms, and he specifically mentions the folly of believing in witches and spells. For that enlightened attitude, he surely deserves credit.

There is a pleasing touch of modesty in the last line of one of his self-advertising doggerels, which will serve as a closing quotation in this portrayal of Doctor Carter’s book:

Behold this female in distress,
Whose pains and fever I can’t express;
Observe, she in her bed appears,
While friends around her shed their tears;
But when my medicine she took,
With speed her sad disease was broke;
So she was by my physic blessed,
As also were ’most all the rest.

² Incidentally, many of the prescriptions were planned on such a grand scale that cauldrons and barrels would have been required for actually making the medicine.