



Thirty-one 'phisitions' were on hand for

## Connecticut's Medical Beginnings

Research show colony's medical men first organized in 1767

By Lawrence D. Nizza, reprinted with permission from *The Hartford Courant (The Courant Magazine, June 2, 1957)*

TODAY, it is easy and safe to acquire medical attention. Pick up the phone, and soon your physician is at your front door, black bag in hand.

"The doctor" is a man of knowledge, armed with modern medical tools and drugs, an individual in whom we have must trust. But the basis for this knowledge and trusts did not come easy. It had to be nurtured by effort, time, patience, experience, and understanding.

Connecticut's pioneer medical men learned this many years ago. As early as 1767, 10 years before Connecticut became a state, 31 "phisitions" traveled on

horseback in freezing weather from many parts of Litchfield County to form a medical society as an "Effectual method to advance medical knowledge and discontuance the growth and increase of ignorant pretenders to the healing art."

YET, THANKS to the research efforts of Dr. Byron Stookey of Sharon it has now been proved that a meeting took place in the Litchfield Court House, a significant meeting showing that our early doctors wanted to learn from each other's experience and to raise professional standards.

Litchfield County, located in the most western part of the

colony, was far removed from the more settled communities along the Connecticut River. Because of its remoteness and sparse population many quacks practiced in this area.

Historians describe these pretenders as those "who with a few Indian nostrums, a lancet, a glisterpipe (used to give enemas), rhubarb, treacle water (molasses) mixed with roman bombast of vena cava and vena portan attacked fevers, nervous disorders and broken bones and, by the grace of perseverance, subdued nature and helped their patients to a passage to the world of spirits before they were ready."

AT THIS time much remained to be learned about the workings of the human body. Fanciful theories prevailed. One was the theory of signatures stating that each sickness had as associated cure through nature. For example, walnut meats because of their resemblance to the brain could be used to cure cranial illness.

But still, epidemics of measles, diphtheria, influenza, dysentery, and smallpox were common in Connecticut.

On Nov. 30, 1767, a notice appeared in The Connecticut Courant for smallpox inoculation. This, announcing establishment of an inoculation clinic by Dr. Uriah Rogers Jr., said: "All that such are disposed to favour him with their custom may depend on being well provided with all necessary accommodations. Provisions, & the best Attendance at the moderate Expense of Four Pounds Lawful Money to each patient."

This was a difficult ear for a young man wishing to become a doctor. There were no medical schools in the colony. Few physicians had the good fortune to study medicine in Europe. The aspiring practitioner apprenticed himself to an experienced doctor. In time, when he felt competent to go on his own, he was examined by one of the societies or set up his offices without examination.

THE EARLIER physicians were men of several professions. Some were both tailor-surgeon, schoolmaster-doctor. These duties were not far removed from each other. In 1649, Jasper Gunn became a licensed physician. In addition to treating sick and broken bodies, he also repaired broken pots and pans. His accounts included bills for repairing kettles and skillets as well as for attending the sick.

Clergymen became doctors. This was a natural turn

of events since they were among the few who could read and write Latin, who knew the settlers intimately and could treat both the soul and the body. The settlers were wresting a hard living from a new land. Many villages and townships could not afford full time physicians.

One of the few doctors who had studied in England was Dr. Simeon Smith who lived in a large, stone colonial homr in Sharon. Dr. Smith attended both the first and second meetings of the Litchfield Society held at the Litchfield Court House. The Court House has burned down but the Simeon Smith home still stands and is today the home of Dr. Byron Stookey, a neurological surgeon and professor emeritus at Columbia, who recently tracked down the records and activities of the society.

Dr. Stookey said:  
"We bought this house some 20 years ago and I became interested in finding out more

about Dr. Smith and the society. The Smith family occupied the house from 1765 to 1915 and the garret contained many of their letters and papers.”

The house was often used as a gathering place for doctors. In February, 1780, an oration was read in the home and this mentioned an earlier meeting of the society.

After following many leads, Dr. Stookey found a photostatic copy of the Connecticut Courant, dated August, 1769, containing arguments against the medical society. “After this it became a matter of tracking it down,” he said. “Thanks to the Connecticut State Library and the Connecticut Historical Society, I found the copy of the Connecticut Courant (Feb. 23, 1767) which announced the first meeting of the society.”

At this meeting, eight resolutions outlining the purposes of the “Medical Corporation in Litchfield

County” were reported. “Two physicians were examined and welcomed to membership and a code of professional ethics was adopted,” Dr. Stookey said.

The Connecticut Courant of Sept. 7 and 14, 1767, reported activities of the second meeting, at which an oration “for the instruction of new members” and a dissertation on mercury were read. It is interesting to note that the article contains a statement from the members expressing their desire that the Dissertation and Oration be published in the Courant.

“And as most of the Members of the Corporation take the Connecticut Courant, it is their special desire and request that the printer thereof publish the before mentioned Dissertation and Oration, principally for their own Benefit. At the same time humbly hoping, that if they convey no Instruction, they may afford no disagreeable Amusement to any

Gentlemen who read the Courant.

THE COURANT was a weekly paper during those years. Evidently, it filled many needs. It was a farmer’s journal, society magazine, medical journal, carrier of all State news, and what have you, all rolled into one. The feeling of the members that the dissertation “may afford no disagreeable amusement,” was indeed ironic.

In reading the dissertation today one cannot help but be amused – “Mercury is the most ponderous of all Fluids... is the most fluid of all bodies... is specifically heavier than our blood in a ratio of 13 to 1... that with regard to acids and alcalies mercury is a perfect neuter... the mercury in the left ventricle of the heart will acquire a velocity 13 times greater than the blood from the first Impetus given by the heart.”

The benefits of introducing mercury into the body were described – “We may hence see how well calculated this Mercury is for destroying all Viscid Cohesions in our blood and who mass of fluids and even the component globules thereof, viz. by its being moved forwards with a force so vastly superior to that of the blood.. ”

In other words, the dissertation asserted that by inserting mercury into the blood stream, the blood would be cleansed out in a similar fashion to flushing a drain pipe. Dr. Philip Goldenberg, a Hartford physician specializing in internal medicine, states, “Medically, we know today that mercury is too thick and would plug up the arteries. The statements included in the dissertation are not sound.”

Arguments against the society appeared in the Connecticut Courant. The author or authors were anonymous but one can deduce vested interests in the

statements; evidently, the quack element and those practicing without licenses were being endangered.

The notice reads, “The grand thing, which is to keep out Quacks... can in no measure be answered... An instance of late of the society’s receiving one into their body, which had read some, but never liv’d with any practitioner, or been in practice himself... but he now comes, cloth’d with the authority of the society recommended to the people, as one worthy to be apply’d to in case of life and death. And yet I sincerely think that the person, they have thus recommended, would pass a better examination than one half of the examiners.”

AS ONE