

VIEWS & REVIEWS

BETWEEN THE LINES

Vicious circles

Theodore Dalrymple *writer and retired doctor*

I mean no disrespect to the current general practitioners of Reading when I say that I doubt that many among them could equal the literary productivity or versatility of Dr Jamieson Boyd Hurry (1857-1930). He was their predecessor as a GP in that town for about 30 years, during and after which he was the author of many works, some of them of European renown.

He was a respected local antiquarian and historian. He wrote several studies of Reading Abbey, and one on the earliest manuscript of English secular music, *Sumer is Icumen in*, which was produced in Reading Abbey and is now in the British Library. I think it likely that his *A History of the Reading Pathological Society* (1909) is definitive and unlikely ever to be excelled.

But the work that brought him European fame was *Vicious Circles in Disease* (1911). Dr Hurry seemed to have found in vicious circles the explanation of a great deal, for he went on to write *Vicious Circles in Poverty* and *Vicious Circles in Sociology*, all of them translated into the major European languages.

Obesity, for example, exhibited many vicious circles. For example, it led to a deposition of adipose tissue in the mesentery, which slowed the passage of the “ingesta,” which increased absorption of the same, leading to further obesity. Likewise with flat feet: obesity gave rise to them, which then discouraged physical activity and led to further obesity. It was to the breaking of vicious circles that patient and doctor should apply their efforts. Dr Hurry published his ideas in the pages of the *Lancet* and the *BMJ*.

Dr Hurry was also a botanist and amateur Egyptologist. His last work, published posthumously in the year of his death, was on

woad, the blue dye of the Picts—or was it the Scots? His book, now rare and expensive, is regarded as a classic, and again the definitive work on the subject. Blue dyeing of the skin seems to have become fashionable once more in these islands: which goes to show that, if you wait long enough, fashions always come round again.

In 1926 Dr Hurry published a study of Imhotep, the ancient Egyptian architect and doctor, who was also the chief minister of the pharaoh, Zoser. Imhotep was later deified, and in the Hellenic period his cult was amalgamated with that of Aesculapius. Dr Hurry, who knew hieroglyphics and was acquainted with the most famous British Egyptologist of his day, Sir Wallis Budge, was such an admirer of Imhotep that he dedicated his book to his memory.

From the purely medical point of view, it is not easy to see upon what Dr Hurry based his admiration for Imhotep. He was known to have been the architect of the first pyramid, and Dr Hurry writes that Imhotep was “a fine type of scholar-physician,” who “rendered service both to the bodies and spirits of the sick and afflicted to whom it was his privilege to minister.” On the other hand he admits, “Unhappily, nothing is known of his work as a physician.” I am reminded of what a Peruvian peasant said when asked why he had voted for Alberto Fujimori: “Because I know nothing about him.”

bmj.com/archive Read articles by Jamieson B Hurry. Vicious circles (*BMJ* 1907;1:1104, doi:10.1136/bmj.1.2419.1104); The breaking of the vicious circle (*BMJ* 1913;1:274, doi:10.1136/bmj.1.2719.274); Concurrent vicious circles (*BMJ* 1924;1:660, doi:10.1136/bmj.1.3302.660)

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