INTRODUCTION: SMALLPOX

Between 1720 and 1723, the introduction of smallpox inoculation and the possible imposition of quarantines to fend off a new outbreak of plague sparked an increased interest in contagionism. One might have expected that the London College of Physicians would have served as a locus of debate and information about inoculation, but in fact the College remained silent on the issue until later in the century. It was the Royal Society that collected information on inoculation, debated it, disseminated information and technical advice, and ultimately initiated a successful campaign to put it into practice.

Smallpox had evidently increased in both incidence and virulence during the seventeenth century. Marchamont Nedham noted in the *Medela* that both smallpox and measles had been comparatively innocuous diseases until forty years earlier.¹ Nedham’s disease categories are always doubtful, but he may have been referring to a severe smallpox epidemic in 1628. Several other serious epidemics hit London in the later seventeenth century, the worst coming in 1681. This was followed by even worse epidemics in the first decades of the eighteenth century, in 1710, 1714, 1716, and 1719, and finally by the terrible epidemic of 1721, which gave the final impetus to inoculation.²

Earlier, we noted that Kircher had attributed smallpox to “animalcules and vermicules” and that Wilkins had included it in his list of contagious diseases caused by an external substance. Many early modern authors, however, did not see smallpox as the product of a simple contagion. Inoculation would change that perception forever.

INOCULATION

In his history of smallpox, Donald Hopkins writes that people in rural parts of Europe practiced some form of deliberate smallpox exposure, but it is not...
clear that this involved breaking or scratching the skin.³ There is a doubtful reference in a possibly spurious verse in a Latin poem attributed to the school of Salerno in the tenth or eleventh century.⁴ Perrott Williams of Haverfordwest reported to James Jurin in 1723 that schoolboys and other Cambrians had practiced an “immemorial custom” called “buying the pox” that involved holding smallpox scabs closed in their hands.⁵ Antonio Vallisneri reported a similar custom in Lombardy to Sloane in 1726. Writing in opposition to inoculation in 1723, Richard Blackmore suggested using a handkerchief if one wished to contract the disease, but he did not provide further details.⁶ Genevieve Miller notes that “the few references to this practice in the medical literature (in the 17c) mention it as an example of the transplantation of disease, not in the present-day sense of transmitting a disease through contagion, but in the magical sense of disease transference common among primitive people.”⁷

As it had in the case of rinderpest, the effort to contain these epidemics involved communication between graduates of Padua and the Fellows of the Royal Society. The Fellows began discussing inoculation as early as 1700/1 when Joseph Lister, a trader for the East India Company, sent Dr. Martin Lister, FRS, a letter about the Chinese method of inoculating patients by blowing powdered smallpox scabs into their nostrils.⁸ There is no evidence that Dr. Lister shared this letter with his colleagues, but a month later Dr. Clopton Havers shared a similar letter that the Fellows did discuss.⁹ The Turks had adopted inoculation in the seventeenth century, probably from trade contacts with the East; an epidemic in Constantinople in 1706 gave European travelers an opportunity to witness inoculation themselves. At about the same time, Cotton Mather, a Congregationalist minister in Boston, learned of the practice from Onesimus, a slave who may have come from Tripoli.¹⁰

The first detailed account of the Turkish practice was provided by Emmanuel Timoni (FRS, 1703), an Italian physician who had attended both Oxford and Padua before setting up a practice in Constantinople.¹¹ In 1713, Timoni sent a letter on inoculation to Dr. John Woodward, FRS, Professor of Physic at Gresham College (and Sloane’s nemesis). This was translated from Latin to English before the Society in June 1714; it also appeared in the Philosophical Transactions.¹² Timoni sent several very similar accounts back to Europe; one went to the Swedish court, and another was published in Leipzig. A copy also appeared in France, and a physician from Constantinople used one in his Leyden thesis on inoculation in 1722.¹³ In 1714, Timoni wrote another account for Sir Robert Sutton, Ambassador to Turkey (published in the Philosophical Transactions in 1723), and in 1717, he became the household physician to the next Ambassador, Edward Wortley Montagu.¹⁴

The reading of Timoni’s first letter to Woodward sparked a discussion among the Fellows, who requested more information from the botanist William Sherard, who was then a consul in Smyrna.¹⁵ In his history of inoculation, written in 1736 and published posthumously in 1756, Sloane recalled that he had been the one who had asked Sherard for a report; he knew