



Disease in the Nineteenth Century

In the Ripon Poor Law Union, medical care was provided by the appointment of a Workhouse Medical Officer and number of District Medical Officers. In addition to their Poor Law duties, the Medical Officers were also independent General Practitioners working from their own premises for fee-paying patients. All held the qualifications LSA (Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries) and MRCS (Member of the Royal College of Surgeons) and were variously referred to in Ripon's census returns as 'Surgeon', 'Surgeon-Apothecary' and 'General Practitioner', rather than 'Doctor' (at this time a title attributed mainly to university-trained physicians).

The role of the Workhouse Medical Officer was to care for Workhouse inmates and those admitted to the Tramp's Wing. He also had to watch for outbreaks of disease, inspect lunatics once a quarter and certify the health of children apprenticed by the Guardians.

The District Medical Officers provided 'outdoor' medical care for the four 'Districts' of the Union. They were obliged to visit all patients who had obtained a Medical Order from the Poor Law Union Relieving Officer and to supply them with medicines as desired (the cost of which was initially to be met by the Medical Officer, hence their 'prescriptions' were often additional food or alcohol such as mutton, beef or gin, as the cost of these items would come from the Poor Rates). Every fortnight they were to make a return of their cases to the Clerk for the inspection of the Guardians.

The image shows an open book titled "DISTRICT MEDICAL RELIEF BOOK" for the year 1861. The pages are filled with handwritten entries in a structured table format. The columns include patient names, addresses, and medical notes. The right page has a large handwritten note in the "OBSERVATION" column.

Ripon Poor Law Union District Medical Relief Book, 1861 (N.Y.C.R.O)

The records of the District Medical Officers show the types of case that they encountered and many of the patients suffered from conditions that might be still be seen in elderly and less affluent populations such as 'age and debility', chronic bronchitis, and leg ulcers.

Some other conditions are also still common today but the names used to describe them in the C19th are not familiar today.

See if you can guess the correct condition:

1. (Per)tussis

- a. Severe headache (such as migraine).
- b. Whooping cough
- c. Painful swelling of toe joint

2. Phthisis

- a. Thyroid disease
- b. Ingrowing eyelash
- c. Tuberculosis

3. Dropsy

- a. Seizure or fit (such as epilepsy)
- b. Swelling due to fluid retention (oedema)
- c. Parkinson's disease

4. 'Itch'

- a. Psoriasis
- b. Scabies
- c. Chicken pox

5. Pediculi

- a. Verruca
- b. Head lice
- c. Infected toenail

Answers

1. Whooping cough

Prior to the introduction of vaccines and antibiotics, this highly contagious bacterial infection was particularly dangerous and frequently fatal for babies and very young children. Close contact, in overcrowded slums or in a Workhouse, would aid the spread of the infection.

2. Tuberculosis (Tb)

Often commonly known in the C19th as 'consumption', Phthisis is a Greek word meaning 'dwindling or wasting away' and might be used for any disease which caused progressive wasting of part of the body but was specifically used for tuberculosis of the lungs. The term 'scrofula' was used to describe swellings in the lymph glands of the neck which were also often a result of tuberculosis.

3. Swelling due to fluid retention.

Swelling of soft tissue, for example, in the lower legs is now referred to as 'oedema' and often treated by diuretics ('water tablets'). Oedema might occur with conditions such as congestive heart disease, kidney and liver disease.

4. Scabies (sarcoptes scabiei)

The itching and scratching symptoms of scabies ('the Itch') are caused by a mite that burrows into the skin.

".. by inserting the point of a needle along the burrows the insect can usually be withdrawn.."

"Weak sulphur ointment smeared over the body, except face and scalp, just before going to bed will usually effect a cure in three to four days. Close-fitting garments should be used to sleep in."

The Hygiene of Schools and Scholars H. Beale Collins D.P.H. 1908 (1st pub 1902)

5. Head lice

In a section entitled 'Neglected Children', Beale Collins discusses a number of conditions associated with poverty and which would also have been a concern for those living in the Workhouse.

One example of a case seen by Ripon Union District Medical Officer William Dixon Jefferson was reported in a newspaper:

KNARESBOROUGH POST Saturday February 6, 1897

"WILFUL NEGLECT OF CHILDREN PARENTS SENT TO GAOL."

"At the Ripon City Court ...Thomas Simpson, and Ellen Simpson, his wife, of Skellbank, Ripon, ... (were charged that they) did wilfully neglect (their) children, or cause them to be neglected, in a manner likely to cause unnecessary suffering or injury to the health of such children... Inspector W.H.Notton, of the N.S.P.C.C. York, stated on the 20th January he was patrolling the streets of Ripon, ... He noticed a boy... He presented a sickly appearance, and was extremely pale. He seemed to be suffering from cold and want, and was shivering. Witness followed the boy to his home... where he found the two defendants and four children...their ages varying from 9 months to 14 years. He examined them, and found body lice on all the children. The boy that he met in the street had no shirt on. The other children were pale and sickly looking...

William Dixon Jefferson, M.R.C.S. ...examined five children, and found them all suffering from body lice... They were in a very dirty state, and badly clothed. He agreed with the evidence of the Inspector as to the dirty state of the house...The presence of vermin would cause the children unnecessary suffering. The surroundings of the house were unsanitary, and calculated to injure the health of the children... The surroundings of the house were very unhealthy, and calculated to injure the health of the children. To a certain extent that would account for their sickly appearance in point of nourishment...

...The Bench retired, and returned after an absence of ten minutes.

THE CHAIRMAN said it was the unanimous decision of the Bench that the male and female defendant be committed to Northallerton gaol for three months with hard labour, the youngest child to accompany the mother, and the other four children to be sent to the Ripon Union Workhouse."

Head lice.. "May be cleared away by bathing with alcohol. This has a solvent effect on the sticky material by which the eggs are attached to the hair. Various preparations of mercury are also used (*N.B. Mercury is now known to be highly toxic*), but they must be applied before irritation of the scalp has been caused.."

"..by the irritation of pediculi, eczema is set up on the scalp, and this is frequently accompanied by swelling of the superficial glands of the neck. Eczema on the body from this cause is ...commonest amongst old people."

'The Hygiene of Schools and Scholars' H. Beale Collins D.P.H. 1908 (1st pub 1902)