

FAMOUS FIGURES

James Lind

JSG Blair

World Vice-President Emeritus, International Society for the History of Medicine



It is a truth that famous men are not necessarily good men and not necessarily even able or clever.

William Cockburn was such a one. Well-born, influential and very confident, he joined the Fleet in 1694 and at the age of 26 wrote a book on 'Sailors Diseases' which became a standard work in two years. Later he became an MD and FRS, and is to date the only naval physician to be buried in Westminster Abbey.

But he was not original, not an attractive character, and his views were out of date even when he wrote them. He prescribed lemon juice for scurvy, but drew no conclusion from its success (1).

But James Lind was a man of true greatness. Born in Edinburgh, apprenticed to a doctor there at the age of 15, he entered the Royal Navy as a surgeon's mate in 1739. This was the same year that Smollet joined the Navy and who in his *Roderick Random*, described the horrors of the Navy and of naval medicine in the 18th century - the perfunctory training of ship's surgeons, the appalling squalor of the sick bay and the brutality of the prototype Captain Oakum. Shortly after, Commodore George Anson, later Admiral Lord Anson, circumnavigated the globe in an epic voyage. On the voyage, a pill made of antimony, dragon's blood (balsam) and wine, pushed with modern-style advertisement by its maker, Joshua Ward, was chosen by the Admiralty for the sailors to take against scurvy. When the Physicians and Apothecaries of London protested against this absurd pill, Ward hired 'puffers to go about town into coffee houses and elsewhere to cry up this wonderful cure'(2). Of the 1955 men who sailed from England, 1051 died, mostly from scurvy. Only 4 were lost in battle.

The first doctor to interview Anson on his return was one Dr Richard Meade, one of the leading doctors of the day and a friend of Dr Johnson. He, with the agreement of Cockburn, decided once more that scurvy was caused by 'putrid air or the malignant air of the sea.' Cockburn had stated this already as the cause in his book 'Sea Diseases' of 1736. The others were 'congenital laziness and indigestible food.' And as far as diet was concerned, Meade and Cockburn advised 'a quantity of wine-vinegar as a substitute for sub-acid fruits.' Now James Lind entered the study of scurvy. By 1747, he was surgeon of HMS Salisbury, a 60-gun ship. It was on her that Lind made his truly epoch-making experiment on

scurvy, the first controlled dietary experiment in the history of Medicine. Although others had certainly had the same idea, it was Lind who proved that the juices of oranges and lemons prevented the disease. Limes were efficacious also, and the regular diet of limes by British sailors and officers is said to be the origin of the term 'limeys'(3). However, Lind could not do much to have his finding accepted, as Cockburn was now senior physician at Greenwich Hospital.

In 1748 Lind took his MD at Edinburgh, now soon to become the leading centre of world medicine. His dissertation was entitled : *De Morbis Veneris Localibus*. In 1758 he was appointed senior physician to Haslar Hospital, by none other than Anson, now First Lord of the Admiralty. At Haslar Lind was able to observe 1146 cases of scurvy (4) out of the total of 5734 patients he received during his first two years there. No man was therefore in a better position to make a thorough study of the disease, and no man ever made better use of his opportunity. Though his findings made little impact on medical opinion, and his sovereign cure was actually rejected by the Sick and Hurt Board of the Navy the year after its publication, and continued to be ignored for forty years by senior naval officers, his treatise is now seen as the most influential book ever written by a Royal Naval surgeon. 'I shall,' he wrote in his introduction, 'propose nothing merely dictated by theory, but shall confirm all by experience and facts ... The world has now almost despaired of finding out a method of preventing this dreadful disease at sea, and it has become a received opinion that it is altogether impossible to prevent or cure it.' Lind's *Dissertation on Fevers and Infections*, published in 1761, some years after he had left the Service, entitles him to be regarded as 'The Father of Preventive Medicine'. It begins with the immortal words: 'The number of seamen in time of war who die by shipwreck, capture, famine fire or sword are but inconsiderable in respect of such as are destroyed by the ship diseases and by the usual maladies of intemperate climates.'

References

1. Blair JSG. The Scots and Military Medicine. In Dow D, ed. *The Influence of Scottish Medicine*. Parthenon Publishing, 1988, Chapter 2.
2. *Medicine and the Navy, 1200-1900*, p 296.
3. *ibid*, p 302.
4. *ibid*, p 298.

Correspondence to: Dr JSG Blair OBE, The Brae, 143 Glasgow Road, Perth PH2 0LX

1 Lime juice was substituted for lemon juice in 1875. It was also in the 19th Century that the ships of the East India Company came to be called 'Lime Juicers' and their crews came to be so called. The nickname later spread to Englishmen in general.