

The Alarming History of Medicine

AMUSING ANECDOTES FROM HIPPOCRATES
TO HEART TRANSPLANTS

By Richard Gordon

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Richard Gordon—famous for his humorous semi-autobiographical series of books that began with *Doctor in the House*, his description of life as a house officer in a British hospital—has authored a compendium of light-hearted anecdotes from medical history intended to review areas of study and practice that show the clay feet of the heroes and heroines who have been pioneers in these enterprises. In a series of chapters encompassing diagnosis, treatment and basic science, Dr. Gordon mentions everyone from the ancients' Hippocrates of Cos to our own Sir David Weatherall of Oxford. He would have us learn that there is more accident than insight in our scientific and clinical progress—and the folk who have brought these advances are more fools and knaves than good people and true.

He is prone to sarcastic epigrammatic introductions to his subjects as, for example, "Great medical breakthroughs were accomplished without the slightest idea of what was being broken through"; "Anesthesia was the bright idea of two New England dentists on the make"; and "The history of medicine is largely the substitution of ignorance by fallacies." He then goes on at some length in the chapters that follow to defend his shabby sentiments but sometimes—as when he sees that he may have gone too far along a path that could bring him criticism for being politically incorrect—he back-pedals from ridicule to support a practice such as organ transplant surgery.

Behind his thesis lies the claim that the figures of medical history—who brought us vaccination, antibiotics, anesthesia, treatments for scurvy, even simply the capacity to diagnose disease and to predict its future—may have 'known' something but, as crude fellows, they 'understood' little and thus can be dis-

daind. Our author is here to make fun of their frailties, hypocrisies, aspirations, and even, as with Semmelweis, their grim deaths.

The result is a particular kind of nastiness that second-rate British humorists derive from Oscar Wilde and Lytton Strachey—absent both the genius of the one and the scholarship of the other. The best twentieth century British humorists—Waugh, Wodehouse, Potter and so forth—tend towards self-deprecatory mockery and scrupulously avoid 'warmed over' Wilde and Strachey with its penchant for cheap shots.

The strengths of a social critic such as Oscar Wilde went far beyond his *outré* ideas and pithy epigrammatic style. He combined great wit with a breadth of interest and compassion that saw the pathetic in the frailties and foibles of others. Someone such as Dr. Gordon, who lacks Wilde's gifts of spirit (and of language), should resist the temptation to imitate him. Otherwise windy, predictable cant rather than humor is the result.

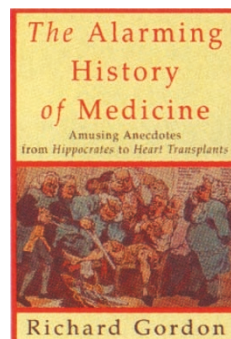
The book's scholarship is as substandard as its spirit. Dr. Gordon finds it impossible to resist gossip or innuendo, as in his claim of lesbianism for Florence Nightingale. He makes much of the fact that treatment discoveries in medicine are often accidental and thus to be less esteemed in that we now have rational treatments based on causal knowledge.

But surely successful treatments of a condition—usually insisted upon by someone with courage and vision—have often directed later investigations towards its mechanisms and causes rather than the other way round (for example, Snow on cholera, Goldberger on pellagra, Semmelweis on puerperal fever, and more recently the dopamine hypothesis in schizophrenia). But probably pointing to facts will not alter any appeal of this sophomoric style. You either like this approach to history or you don't.

I found the book repellent. It is short-sighted about

human nature and fundamentally hostile to progress, especially that achieved by individuals with personal ambitions. In that regard we have here late twentieth century Blimpishness—a left-wing Colonel Blimp to be sure, but, as with the right-wing version, full of disdain for others—"not our kind"—and holding a philistine nihilism that sees only base motives—"he's in trade"—behind all effort and achievement.

Oscar Wilde would have hated it as well. As he pointed out in *De Profundis*, "Things are, in their essence, what we choose to make them", with the obvious codicil that what we make of things tells who we are. This book indicates that Dr. Gordon is (or has become) more smug and scornful of enthusiasm than those of us who enjoyed his earlier work realized.



Cytokine Knockouts

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& Kathrin Muegge
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Genetic analysis remains the most informative approach to the study of the physiological role(s) of a gene. It is not surprising, therefore, that less than a decade after the first knockout mouse was created, over 800 genes have been successfully targeted in embryonic stem cells—all with the goal of studying the

functions of these genes in mammals. A cottage industry has sprung up around this technology and scores of laboratories are targeting the genes of their research interests. Recognizing the strength of this approach, and armed with the knowledge that immunodeficiencies in patients and animal models have provided invaluable insights into the functions of immune-related genes, immunologists were among the first to employ this technology. So far, over 150 immunologically-related knockout mutant mice have been generated and the rewards have been bountiful.

Cytokine Knockouts is an effort to summarize in one volume the phenotypes of some important cytokine gene knockout mice. The targeted audience includes immunologists actively researching in this field and clinical scientists interested in immune-related developments that may