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DR. ADAM THOMSON, THE ORIGINATOR OF THE
AMERICAN METHOD OF INOCULATION FOR
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By HENRY LEE SMITH, M. D., Baltimore.

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DR. ADAM THOMSON, THE ORIGINATOR OF THE
AMERICAN METHOD OF INOCULATION FOR
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By HENRY LEE SMITH, M. D., Baltimore.

Dr. Adam Thomson was born and educated in Scotland. [49] The exact date and place of his birth have not been ascertained, but, it is said, that he was on his way to Leith to claim his share of the family estate when he sickened and died in New York in the year 1767. In his memorable and eloquent Discourse on the Preparation of the Body for the Small-pox and the Manner for Receiving the Infection, he refers to "the famous Monro of Edinburgh" as one of his first masters [50] in the healing art.

He settled in Prince George's County, in the Province of Maryland, early in the eighteenth century. In 1748 he went to Philadelphia where he continued the practice of his profession, his services being in demand throughout the colonies because of his eminence and success as an inoculator.

Dr. Thomson was one of the original members of the Philadelphia Assembly (1748); a founder of the St. Andrew's Society of Philadelphia in 1749, and vice-president of that body in 1751. He is credited with the leadership in the organization of the St. Andrew's Society of the State of New York, having been elected the first vice-president in 1756; and its president the succeeding year.

In 1738 he began his method of preparing the body for small-pox. It consisted of a two-weeks' course of treatment, or "cooling regimen" preparatory to inoculation, to wit: a light, non-stimulating diet, the administration of a combina-

¹ An address read before the Johns Hopkins Hospital Historical Club, November 9, 1908.

[50] tion of mercury and antimony, and moderate bleeding and purgation. He admitted that Boerhaave's² Aphorism No. 1392 advanced the "hint" that mercury and antimony properly prepared and administered "might act as an antidote for the variolous contagion." Dr. Thomson's phenomenal success with the method convinced him that "mercury under proper management is more of a specific agent against the effects of the variolous than the venereal poison." He was careful to give it within the bounds of salivation and to modify the regimen to suit the patient's age and constitution.

In his Discourse he says: "On every occasion, for the space of twelve years that I have been called upon to prepare people for the small-pox, either for receiving it in the natural way, or by inoculation (for I have prepared many for both), I have constantly us'd such a medicine as mention'd, and I can honestly declare that I never saw one so prepar'd in any considerable danger by the disease."

After the preparatory treatment, Dr. Thomson preferred his patients to receive the infection by inoculation rather than by exposing them to small-pox itself; his experience having shown that those inoculated escaped severe sore throat, and, usually, had a milder type of the disease than those allowed to contract it by direct contact. He inoculated on the leg, because he was of the opinion that the seat of local reaction should be at a point most distant from the brain and vital organs. To prevent or remedy a troublesome sore he advised "about 3 or 4 half drams of Jesuit's bark given at so many doses during the day."

His explanation of the manner in which immunity is acquired against small-pox is most interesting, and suggests to readers of to-day Pasteur's exhaustion hypothesis. He states: "It appears to me then highly probable, that there is a certain quantity of an infinitely subtile matter, which may be called the *variolous fuel*, equally, intimately and universally diffused

² Boerhaave's Aphorism, 1392: "Some success from antimony and mercury prompts us to seek for a specific for the small-pox in a combination of these two minerals, reduced by art, to an active, but not to an acrimonious or corrosive state."

through the blood of every human creature, in some more, [50] in others less, that lies still and quiet in the body, never showing itself in any manner hitherto discovered, until put in action by the *variolous contagion*, at which time it is totally expelled by the course of the disease." He believed that mercury and antimony mitigated the malignant quality of the variolous fuel.

Dr. Thomson found the average medical practitioner of America poorly educated, and therefore a source of danger in the community. He recommends in the Discourse that the legislature interpose in behalf of the safety of the people and appoint proper persons to judge of the qualifications of those permitted to practice. To prevent harmful results from the use of his method in the hands of the uneducated, he says: "I have purposely avoided giving any formal directions about the preparation, thinking it sufficient to propose the general intentions to be pursued, which every judicious physician easily knows how to execute, and adapt to different constitutions; for I think none else ought to be entrusted with a matter of this sort. Nor do I mean by such, all those who by the courtesy of *America* are stil'd doctors, because it is well known that surgeons, apothecaries, chymists, and druggists or even mere smatterers in any of these, are all promiscuously call'd by that title, as well as real physicians."

Dr. Thomson delivered his Discourse on the Preparation of the Body for the Small-pox before the trustees and others in the Academy of Philadelphia, on Wednesday, November 21, 1750.³ It was published the same year by Benjamin Franklin; reprinted in London in 1752, and in New York in 1757. It met with favorable reviews in America, England and France. Dr. George W. Norris, of Philadelphia, who had been unable to obtain the work, comments as follows: "It is spoken of as being written in a modest and plain style, the arguments made

³ An original Franklin print of the Discourse, probably the only one extant, is on file in the library of the Surgeon-General's Office, Washington, D. C. Copies of it may be seen in the libraries of the Johns Hopkins Hospital, the Medical and Chirurgical Faculty of Maryland and of the College of Physicians, Philadelphia.

[50] use of as highly plausible, and the author as actuated with a generous desire to communicate salutary advice in the management of a distemper which has proved fatal to multitudes." (The Early History of Medicine in Philadelphia, Geo. W. Norris, 1886, p. 106.)

Dr. Thacher (Amer. Med. Biography, 1828, Vol. I, p. 66) refers to the Discourse in the following manner: "This production was highly applauded both in America and Europe, as at that period (1750) the practice of inoculation was on the decline. The author states that inoculation was so unsuccessful at Philadelphia that many were disposed to abandon the practice; wherefore, upon the suggestion of the 1392'd Aphorism of Boerhaave, he (Thomson) was led to prepare his patients by a composition of antimony and mercury, which he had constantly employed for twelve years, with uninterrupted success."

[51] Drs. Redman and Kearsley of Philadelphia, and others, first opposed the method, but later it was universally adopted in the colonies and was favorably received abroad. In England it was used and recommended by Huxham, Andrew, Baker and others. de La Condamine, in France, recorded the success it had brought the English and American inoculators, and mentioned that the method was upheld by a New York physician in his Leyden thesis in 1764.⁴ It soon became known as the American method of inoculation, and was employed with gratifying results, notably by Dr. Gale of Connecticut, Dr. Alexander Garden of Charleston, South Carolina, Dr. McKane of New Jersey, and by Dr. Alexander Hamilton of Maryland, who wrote ably in its defense. It was introduced as routine procedure in the first inoculating hospitals which were established near Boston, Mass., in February, 1764. Dr. William Barnett was called from Philadelphia to supervise the work because of his reputation there as a successful inoculator.

In describing the success of the method in the Transactions

⁴"Un médecin de la Nouvelle Yorck, en Amérique soutint à Leyde l'année dernière une thèse en faveur de cette methode," etc.

of the Philosophical Society for 1765, Dr. Gale makes this [51] statement: "A. D. 1764. At this present writing, the small-pox is prevalent in the town of Boston; by the last accounts, 3000 had recovered from inoculation in the new method, by the use of mercury, and 5 only had died, viz., children under 5 years of age; so that it appears, that death without inoculation is 1 in 7 or 8; by inoculation without mercury, 1 in 80 or 100; *by inoculation with mercury, 1 in 800 or 1000.*" Dr. Gale in error, *ibid.*, styles Dr. Thomson "Dr. Thomas of Virginia," who, he says, began the "new method" with Dr. Murison of Long Island and several others in 1745. As a matter of fact, Dr. Thomson started his preparatory treatment seven years previously, in the Province of Maryland and carried on this pioneer work unaided by others.

In 1762 there appeared on November 25, in the Maryland Gazette, a long and scholarly letter written by Dr. Thomson, in which he laments the fact that his method of inoculation had been taken up by quacks, and reduced by them to "a matter of merchandise." He particularly condemns a certain Mr. Barnard of New Jersey, whom he styles "a man of little or no education in physic, or indeed in anything else," and also "the Jersey secret monger." It seems that Barnard had learned the details of Dr. Thomson's "cooling regimen" from a reputable physician, and had used it in 1000 cases with but two or three deaths, and these occurred "in very young children who were said to have died of other disorders." Barnard gave Dr. Thomson no credit for his success, but spoke of the drugs used as "specific remedies." He was known to have sold the secret of the "specific remedies" to other charlatans for a "piece of money." And further we read, that among a number of physicians in and about Philadelphia, who, from the first, had tried to bring Dr. Thomson's method into disrepute, was one, "Dr. J. R.," of New Jersey. This physician, Dr. Thomson tells us, after having openly ridiculed the method, as described in the Discourse, published some years later in one of the Philadelphia newspapers (ostensibly for the good of humanity) an account of the great success he had experienced in inoculating individuals, who had previously been put upon

[51] a course of mercury and antimony. He claimed with real cunning and with great injustice to Dr. Thomson that he found the source of inspiration for the *new method* in the writings of Boerhaave.

On the other hand, in the letter quoted, Dr. Thomson writes: "It gives me pleasure to do justice to the judgment and candour of Dr. McKane of New Brunswick in the Jerseys, on this occasion; for he inoculated a very considerable number, the same time with Mr. Barnard, but was so far from acting the mean and ungrateful part complained of, that he honestly owned all of his patients were prepared in the manner directed in my Discourse . . . and he told me further, that he never gave his preparatory medicines in such a manner as to affect the salivary glands, and his success was very great, having never had a patient, so prepared, in the smallest danger." Again (*loc. cit.*) he thanks Dr. Alex. Garden, of Charleston, S. C., for his honesty in stating in public there that the uncommon success following the inoculation of a great number of individuals during a very fatal epidemic of small-pox in 1759, was entirely due to the employment of the method recommended in the Discourse.

In conclusion the writer wishes to emphasize the fact that Dr. Thomson's claim of the specificity of calomel in small-pox, "when used under proper management," was *strongly supported by the experience* of many impartial and trustworthy physicians. Moreover, we have seen that even quacks who employed the method somewhat at random, increased their reputation by the good results obtained from the use of mercury. Hence it would seem reasonable to assume that had inoculation not been superseded by vaccination, the American method of preparing the body for small-pox would have remained, with but slight modification, the most rational means of reducing the mortality during disastrous epidemics of the disease.

Dr. Thomson married the widow of James Warddrop, Esq., of Virginia. She was Lettice Lee, daughter of Philip Lee, of Virginia, and a great grand-daughter of Richard Lee, the emigrant. After Dr. Thomson's death, she married Col. Joseph

Sim.⁵ She had issue by Dr. Thomson only, Mary Lee Thom- [51]
son, who married Col. Lilburn Williams, of Maryland, and
Alice Corbin Thomson, who married Captain John Hawkins, a
gallant officer of the 3d Virginia regiment of the Revolutionary
Army.

Dr. Adam Thomson died in New York City on September [52]
18, 1767.⁶ The following notice of his death appeared three
days later in the New York Mercury:

"On Friday morning early, died here, Adam Thomson, Esq.,
a physician of distinguished abilities in his profession, well
versed in polite literature, and of unblemished honor and integ-
rity as a gentleman."

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examined; particularly Dr. Mead's censure of Dr. Boerhaave's
opinion concerning a specific antidote, and Mr. Kearsley's re-
marks. In a letter to a physician in Philadelphia. By Alexander

⁵ From the Maryland Gazette, Thursday, April 11, 1776: "Prince
George's County, Maryland, April the 7th, 1776. On Wednesday,
the 3d inst., died Mrs. Sim, wife of Col. Joseph Sim, of this
county, of a very painful and lingering illness which she sup-
ported with uncommon firmness and resolution. This lady pos-
sessed many virtues, accomplishments and valuable qualities in
a very high degree. Her disconsolate husband and children and
numerous relations and friends are left to lament their loss.

⁶ It has been incorrectly stated by a number of writers, that
Dr. Adam Thomson died in Maryland in 1768.

[52] Hamilton, physician at Annapolis, in Maryland. *Philadelphia: Printed by William Bradford, 1751.* Evan's American Biography, Vol. III, Blakely Press, Chicago, p. 10, 1905.

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