BOOK REVIEW

_Spitting blood. The history of tuberculosis_

Helen Bynum

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I approached this book with some interest, as my own maternal grandmother (who I never knew) died of tuberculosis (TB) in a Liverpool sanatorium in the pre-streptomycin days of the 1930s. That sanatorium later became Fazakerley Hospital, where I have worked for over 20 years (albeit with the now more politically correct name of “Aintree University Hospital”).

Helen Bynum is a respected and prolific academic medical historian, and predictably makes an excellent job of the difficult task of analysing the history of such a complex disease as tuberculosis. It is also a disease inextricably enmeshed with the socio-economic background of the population it affects.

The book deals comprehensively with the ancient history of the disease and includes explanations of the terms “consumption”, “phthisis” and “scrofula”. The pathological discovery of “tubercles” in the lungs, in the early 19th century, would later lead to the modern name of the disease. But like everything about TB, its pathology is complex and variable, perhaps explaining the variable clinical course. For centuries it was known that some could self-cure of consumption, but that it could also run a chronic, or very fulminant, course (“galloping consumption”). The introduction of the stethoscope by Laennec (also in the early 19th century) gave doctors a new tool to describe the wheezes, crackles and dullness that tuberculous lungs may exhibit – but did nothing to help the patient’s outcome. The discovery by Robert Koch of the “tubercle bacillus” was a real advance, and led to more accurate diagnosis, and the ability to follow the course of the disease microbiologically.

The story of famous TB sufferers such as John Keats and the Brontë Sisters are recounted. Keats had taken the “good weather” option popular for the rich in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. This was often extended to a bizarre “tuberculose grand tour”. Other ineffective treatments abounded. Standard bleeding and purgation was practiced of course; but more unusually, frankincense and myrrh (not apparently, * Address for correspondence: email: g.gill@liverpool.ac.uk
gold). “Parker’s Tonic” seemed more appropriate, as at least it contained 42% ethanol (more than a good malt whisky!). A particularly bizarre therapy in the 18th century for scrofula (glandular TB) was the “Royal Touch”, where a monarch’s finger was deemed enough to cure a commoner with tuberculous adenitis. Court officials were careful to select subjects, but apparently it was seen as a “good thing to do” for a caring King or Queen.

The 20th century brought the massive Sanatorium Movement, with its regime of bedrest and fresh air. It was still a minority therapy, as during 1913 in the UK there were 12,000 patients in sanatoria, but it only made up 4% of total cases (by that time TB was a notifiable disease). Surgical interventions such as pneumothorax and phrenic nerve crush came and went, but the whole face of the disease changed with the discovery of streptomycin and its introduction in the immediate post-World War II years. Other drugs (e.g. PAS, INH) followed, and at last real clinical trials were showing dramatic effectiveness. With effective treatment available, screening became widespread, with the famous mobile mass radiography vans of the 1950s.

Dr Bynum’s last chapter is entitled “A job half-done”, and of course represents the disappointments of the last 2 to 3 decades, with TB making a major resurgence worldwide. This is of course largely due to the global HIV/AIDS epidemic (which is a major risk factor for TB), as well as the growing numbers of refugees and migrants from high-risk areas. Added to this is the growing problem of drug resistance, culminating in the emergence of MDRTB (multidrug resistant tuberculosis). There will clearly be more to write about this most difficult of diseases in the future.

This is an excellent account of TB history – scholarly but also readable. A small grumble relates not to the author but to the publisher. This book is one of OUPs Medical Biography series, and in an effort to keep the price down (presumably), the paper quality and illustrations are poor. Nevertheless, this book can be thoroughly recommended.