A Bicentennial Essay

Benjamin Rush on Cancer

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It is fitting in this bicentennial year of the United States, for the edification of oncologists, to cast a glance at what physicians of the American Revolution thought and practiced about cancer.

There is no better source of such enlightenment than the writings of Benjamin Rush (1745-1813) of Philadelphia. Of English Quaker stock, born in Pennsylvania and educated at Princeton and Edinburgh, he was a signer of the Declaration of Independence, Professor of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, and Treasurer of the United States Mint. He also was a stormy petrel who quarreled with George Washington and who practiced copious blood-letting and purgation for yellow fever. A self-confident theorist, he nevertheless was an able, shrewd clinician.

The letters of Benjamin Rush were collected and edited in 1951 by L. H. Butterfield (1). Of over 650 selected letters written from 1761 to 1813, four are consultations regarding cancer.

The underlying theme of all four letters is to disclaim a cancer paste introduced by one of his students, Dr. Hugh Martin, who purported that it was an Indian vegetable remedy. Rush (2) found that the preparation contained arsenic.

Elisha Hall, M.D., of Fredericksburg, Virginia, wrote to Rush, his cousin, about a patient with advanced breast cancer, Mary (Ball) Washington, mother of George Washington. She died, age 82, a month after Rush's reply of July 6, 1789:

"The respectable age and character of your venerable patient lead me to regret that it is not in my power to suggest a remedy for the cure of the disorder you have described in her breast. I know nothing of the root that you mention is found in Carolina and Georgia, but from a variety of inquiries and experiments I am disposed to believe that there does not exist in the vegetable kingdom an antidote to cancers. All the supposed vegetable remedies I have heard of are compounds of some mineral caustics. The arsenic is the most powerful of any of them. It is the basis of Dr. Martin's powder. I have used it in many cases with success, but have failed in some. From your account of Mrs. Washington's breast, I am afraid no great good can be expected from the use of it. Perhaps it may cleanse and thereby retard its spreading. You may try it, diluted in water. Continue the application of opium and camphor, and wash it frequently with a decoction of red clover. Give anodynes when necessary, and support the system with bark and wine. Under this treatment, she may live comfortably many years and finally die of old age."

John Adams on September 12, 1811, wrote to Rush for advice about his daughter, Mrs. Abigail Smith, who suspected that a lump in her breast was cancerous. Following the reply from Rush, dated September 20, she had the breast removed, but died in 1813. Rush wrote to John Adams as follows:

"...After the experience of more than 50 years in cases similar to hers, I must protest against all local applications and internal medicines for her relief. They now and then cure, but in 19 cases out of 20 in tumors in the breast they do harm or suspend the disease until it passes beyond that time in which the only radical remedy is in-effectual. The remedy is the knife. From her account of the moving state of the tumor, it is now in a proper situation for the operation. Should she wait till it suppurates or even inflames much, it may be too late. The pain of the operation is much less than her fears represent it to be. . . . I repeat again, let there be no delay in flying to the knife. Her time of life calls for expedition in this business, for tumors such as hers tend much more rapidly to cancer after 45 than in more early life. I sincerely sympathize with her and with you and your dear Mrs. Adams in this family affliction, but it will be but for a few minutes if she submit to have it extirpated, and if not, it will probably be a source of distress and pain to you all for years to come. It shocks me to think of the consequences of procrastination in her case."

David Howell of Providence, Rhode Island, wrote for advice regarding treatment of what must have been senile keratoses of the skin. Rush's reply of April 27, 1804, recommends an arsenic paste, reassures the patient, and includes a bill for 5 dollars:
“Scabs such as you have described on your face often occur between the ages of 60 and 70. They rarely end in cancer, and never except when they are neglected or treated with improper remedies.

A plaster made of equal parts of tar and beeswax should be spread on a piece of black silk or leather and worn constantly upon the affected parts...

If this application does not cure the sores in five or six weeks, apply to them a little white arsenic wetted with water, and cover them afterwards with a soft plaster made of beeswax and sweet oil. Repeat the application of arsenic three or four times... This remedy is generally so effectual... that it will be unnecessary to mention any others.

Your diet should by no means be abstemious. You may eat eggs, oysters, fish, and a little animal food daily with safety and advantage. The sores on your face are of a local nature. Your blood is not in the least tainted with any humor connected with them. A little wine may be taken with the above food.

I shall not name a cancer doctor to you, for you are in no more danger of that disease from your present trifling and superficial complaint than you are of a dropsy or pulmonary consumption...

No internal medicines of any kind are indicated in your case.”

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Josephus Bradner Stuart, M.D., a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania in 1812, wrote for advice about the use of a cancer remedy. Rush replied on May 24, 1810. The reputation of “cancer doctors,” we may hope, has improved since his days!

“...I have known a great number of cancer-doctors who have for a while succeeded in curing cancerous sores, but who have uniformly depreciated in character and fortune from their numerous failures or from a return of the sores which were said to have been cured by them. I have observed further that most of those cancer-doctors pretend to have obtained their remedies from the Indians of our country, and that they consist wholly of vegetables. The improbability of this being the case appears from cancers being unknown among the Indians and from so small a number of vegetables retaining a corrosive or strongly irritating power when they are dry. I suspect arsenic to be the basis of all those cancer powders...

Should you succeed in the cure of cancers by the remedy you have mentioned, you would derive but a small profit from your labors, for a majority of the persons afflicted with them are poor people. Should you fail in all or most cases, you would lose the fair and respectable character you have gained by your extensive education and honorable graduation in medicine.”

REFERENCES

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