

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘so why haven’t the insurance companies changed their tables?’

‘The answer probably lies in the innate conservatism of any large organisation, which is well recognised in a physical context by the captains of large liners and nowadays large aircraft. Also, from what you say, it may well be that with younger people who have not yet got any disease there is still some justification for assuming a disadvantage with a high diastolic pressure.’

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘but you agree that there are strong reasons for changing the tables in the elderly?’

‘It seems so,’ he said, ‘and if insurance companies don’t, someone will suffer. By the nature of underwriting it might not be themselves, but instead the pocket of a person with a blood pressure of 152/110, who is wrongly assessed as being more at risk than someone with a blood pressure of 196/88, or 152/56.’

*We agreed that it may take years for anything to change.*

Coemgenus

## Shakespeare and syphilis

*The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices  
Make instruments to plague us.*<sup>1</sup>

Syphilis reached England in 1497 where it became known as the French disease:

*News have I that my Nell is dead i’ the spital  
Of malady of France.*<sup>2</sup>

The name great-pox (as opposed to smallpox) was soon applied:

*A pox o’ your bottle!*<sup>3</sup>

Hair loss, one of the most conspicuous symptoms, became known as the French crown:

*BOTTOM: I will discharge it in either your straw-coloured  
beard, your orange-tawney beard, your purple-in-grain beard,  
or your French-crown-coloured beard.*

*QUINCE: Some of your French crowns have no hair at all, and  
then you will play bare-faced.*<sup>4</sup>

*Timons of Athens* teems with references to primary, secondary and tertiary syphilis. There is no more powerful description of the ravages of tertiary syphilis than that uttered by Timon as he urges two prostitutes to go forth and destroy:

*Consumptions sow  
In hollow bones of man [periostitis]; strike their sharp shins  
[tabes dorsalis],  
And mar men’s spurring [leg ulcers]. Crack the lawyer’s voice  
[ulceration of the larynx],  
That he may never more false title plead,  
Nor sound his quilllets [subtleties] shrilly: hoar [cover with  
blotches] the flamen [priest]  
That scolds against the quality of flesh*

*And not believes himself; down with the nose [destruction of  
nasal septum],  
Down with it flat; take the bridge quite away  
Of him that, his particular to forsee,  
Smells from the general weal: make curled-pate ruffians bald  
[alopecia]  
And let the unscarred braggarts [uninfected boasters] of war  
Derive some pain from you.*<sup>5</sup>

Treatment of syphilis relied upon heat and steam treatment with mercury fumes from cinnabar (half quicksilver, half brimstone):

*No; to the spital go,  
And from the powdering-tub of infamy  
Fetch forth the lazar kite [diseased woman] of Cressid’s kind  
[prostitute].*<sup>6</sup>

The hot baths may have inadvertently been using hypothermia treatment for syphilis, thereby predating von Jauregg’s ‘cure’ by three hundred years.

### References

1. Shakespeare W. *King Lear*. V.iii.193.
2. Shakespeare W. *King Henry V*. V.i.86
3. Shakespeare W. *The tempest*. III.ii.86
4. Shakespeare W. *Midsummer night’s dream*. I.ii.94
5. Shakespeare W. *Timon of Athens*. IV.iii.168
6. Shakespeare W. *King Henry V*. II.i.78

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