The role of the physician is to entertain the patient while Nature heals the illness.

- Voltaire

06-P3) Ulrich von Hutten, "A Treatise of the French Disease" (1520?)

CHAP. I: Of the beginning of the French Pox, and the several Names by which it has been called

It hath pleased God, that in our time, Sicknesses should arise, unknown to our Forefathers, as we have Cause to surmise In the Year of Christ 1493, or thereabout, this Evil began amongst the People, not only of France, but originally at Naples in the French Camp, who under King Charles were set down before that Place, and where it was taken notice of, before it came elsewhere; upon which account the French, disdaining that it should be of their Country, gave it the Name Neo-politane, or the Evil of Naples; reckoning, it is before observed, a Shame to them to have it called by that of the French Pox. However the all Nations hath obtained, and we also in this Book, shall so call it, not one of Envy to that noble and courteous People, but to prevent a Misunderstanding among some, should we give it any other Appellation.

At the time of its first Appearance, some Men superstitiously named it the Sickness of Mevin, from I know not what holy Man of that Name. Some again accounted it of kin to Job's Scab, whom this Likeness I Think also hath brought into the Number of Saints.

[...]

The Divines [priests and clerics] imputed this Disease to the Wrath of God, sent from Heaven as a scourge for our Wickedness, and took upon them thus to preach
 openly, as if they had been admitted of Council with God, and came to understand thereby, that Men never lived worse, or so bad as we; or as if in the Golden Age of Augustus and Tiberius, when Christ was here on Earth, no such Evil could have happened; as if Nature had no Power to usher in any new Diseases, which in all other things bringeth forth great Changes and Alterations. As well may they prattle that of late in our times, because Men are grown better in their Lives, therefore is the remedy of Guajacum found out as a Cure for this Sickness: So well do these things accord, which these Pretenders to the Oracles of God do thus deliver to us.

Now also began the Enquiry of the Physicians, who searched not so much for proper Remedy, as for the Cause; for they cared [not] even to behold it, much less as the first to touch the infected; for truly when it first began, it was so horrible to behold, that one would scarce think the Disease that now reigneth, to be of the same kind. They had Boils that stood our like Acorns, from whence issued such filthy stinking Matter, that whosoever came within the Scent, believed himself infected. The Color of these was of a dark Green, and the very Aspect as shocking as the Pain itself; which yet was as if the Sick had lain upon a Fire.

Not long after its beginning, it made a Progress into Germany, where it hath wander’d more largely than in any other Place; which I ascribe to our greater Intemperance than that of other Nations.

There were some who having taken Counsel of the Stars, prophesy’d that this Sickness should not endure more than seven Years, in which they were out [mistaken], if they meant the same of the general, and all the subsequent Symptoms but if they interpreted concerning the foremost outrageous kind thereof, which cometh of itself, and not barely by Infection, Corruption of the Atmosphere, or of divine Appointment, they were then, I say, not deceived; for it tarried not long above the seventh Year before the Disease abated of its Fierceness, and that the succeeding one, which yet remaineth, became not so filthy. The Sores being now, less, neither so high, nor yet so hard, though there is often a broad creeping Scab, under which the Poison lurketh, and
bringth forth farther Mischief; and it is thought this Disease in our Days ariseth not, unless by Infection from carnal Contact, as in copulating with a diseased Person; since it appears now that young Children, old Men and others, not given to Fornication or bodily Lust, are very rarely diseased.

Also the more a Man is addicted to these Pleasures, the sooner he catcheth it, and as they manage themselves after, either temperately or otherwise, so it the sooner leaves them, holds them a long time, or utterly consumes them. Thus is it more easy to the Italians and Spaniards as well as others, living Soberly, but through our surfeiting and Intemperance it doth longer hold, and more grievously vex us.

CHAP. II: Of the Causes of this Disease

The Physicians have not yet certainly discovered the secret Cause of this Disease, although they have long and diligently enquired after the same. In this all agree, which is very evident, that through some unwholsome Blasts of the Air, which happened about that time, the Lakes, Fountains, and even the Waters of the Sea were corrupted, and the Earth for a large Tract, as it were poisoned thereby entire Pastures were infected, and venomous Steams filled the whole Air, which living Creatures took in with their Breath; for this Distemper at first was found among the Cattle as well as among Men.

The Astrologers deriving the Cause from the Stars, said That it proceeded from the Conjunction of Saturn and Mars, which happened not long before, and of two Eclipses of the Sun; affirmiting, that hence they perceived were like to ensue many choleric as well as phlegmatic Distempers, which would long continue, and slowly depart; Such as Elephantiasis, Lepra, Impetigo, and all kinds of Scabs and Boils, with whatever could afflict Man’s Body, as the Gout, Palsy, Sciatica or Joint-Ach, and the like Infirmities; and that these should chance rather in the North, by reason of the Sign Aquarius, wherein fell the first Eclipse, and in the West from Piscis, in which happened the last.

But the Physicians concluded this to arise from ill Humors abounding in Men's
Bodies, as black, adust [burnt] or yellow Choler; Salt Phlegm; of one of these alone, or
mix'd together with the rest, and thrown out to the Skin, which is covered over with
Scabs; whilst that which proceedeth of raw, heavy and gross Humor, is cast upon the
Joints, causing great Pain therein, raising also Swellings with hard Knobs or Knots; and
shriveling of the Skin; with stubborn Headaches also, strangely altering the Complexion
of the Sick. Some briefly concluding Say, it arose from a corrupt, burnt or adust, and
infected Blood, and these Disputes held doubtful for long rime, the Nature of the Dis-
ease not rightly known; but now it is, generally believed, and my Self do verily think it to
be no other, than the Effect of an apostemated, rotten or corrupted Blood, which begin-
ning to dry, turneth into these hard swellings or Knobs, the spring or Source which is in
the liver corrupted. [. . .]

CHAP. III: Of the Symptoms attending this Disease.

Though this Distemper singly may be lightly accounted, yet doth it soon convert
itself into many others; and indeed whatever Pains affect a Man’s Joints, may seem to
arise hence; for first there is a sharp ache in these Parts, and yet nothing to be seen;
but afterwards a Flux of Humours falls down, occasioning a Swelling, which beginning
to harden about the Part, a most vehement Pain ariseth: which is the first Appearance
of the Distemper, when it begins to fortify itself as in a castle, there time, and thence to
disperse its resting for a long time, and thence to disperse its Emissaries into every part
of the body, kindling therein all sorts of Aches and Dolors; when the longer the Swel-
lings are before they ripen, the more pain is the Patient to suffer, and truly of all others,
this is the most intolerable. I myself had such a Knob or hard Swelling above my left
Heel on the inside the which after it was indurated for the Space of seven Years, could
by no Applications be softened or brought to Matter, but still continued a Bone, till by the
help of Guajacum it gradually vanished.

In Women the Disease resteth in their secret Places, wherein are little pretty
Sores full of venomous Poison, being very dangerous for such as unknowingly meddle
with them; the which sickness, when contracted from these infected Women, is so much the more grievous, by how much they are more inwardly corrupted and polluted therewith. By this a Man’s Sinews are sometimes relaxed, and again grow hard, and contract themselves. Sometimes the Disease transforms itself into the Gout; at others, into a Palsy and Apoplexy and infecteth many, also with a Leprosy; for it is thought these Diseases are Neighbours each to the other, by reason of some Affinity there appears between them; those who are seized with the Pox frequently becoming Lepers, and through the acuteness of the Pain, Men will shake and quiver as in a Fever. After this there will appear small Holes and Sores, turning cankerous and fistulous, which the more putrid they grow, the more they will eat into the Bones, and when they have been long corrupted the Sick [man] grows lean, his Flesh wasting away so that there remaineth only the Skin as a Cover for them. And by this many fall into Consumptions, having their inward Parts corrupted.

Besides all which, from this Disease floweth another called Cachexy, which renders the Body bloated, as if the Flesh and Skin were filled with Water. Some have Sores in their Bladder, and oftentimes the Stomach and Liver is quite spoiled by the Sickness; and in this their Opinion is false, who say, that these Humours, Swellings and Knobs are not the proper Symptoms of this Disease, but happen only by the Use of the Quick-silver Ointments, of which Opinion are most part of our Physicians in Almayn [Germany]; but they are deceived in this thing as they are in many others; for I know it of a Certainly, that there are some who have had these Appearances which were never anointed with Quick-silver; as among many others I could here name, I have had certain Knowledge and Experience in my Father Ulrich de Hutten.

CHAP. IV: How Men at first attempted the Cure of this Disease

Whilst the Physicians were thus confounded like Men amazed, the Surgeons as wretchedly lent a helping Hand to the same Error, and first began to burn the Sores with hot Irons. But for as much as there seemed no end of this cruelty, they endeavoured
now to avoid the same with their Ointments, but all in vain, unless they added Quick-silver thereunto. To this purpose they used the Powders of Myrrh, Mastich, Ceruse, Bay-berries, Allum, Bole Armoniac [sic], Cinnabar, Vermillion, Coral, burnt Salt, Rust of Brass, Litharge, Rust of Iron, Refine of Turpentine, and all manner of the best Oils; as of Bay, Roses, Turpentine, Juniper, and of yet greater Power the Oil of Spike; also Hogs-Lard, Neats-Foot Oil, May Butter, Goats and Deers Suet, Virgin Honey, red Worms dried to Powder, or boiled up with Oil, Camphire, Euphorbium, and Castor.

With these, fewer or more, they anointed the sick Man’s Joints, his Arms, Thighs, his Neck and Back, with other parts of his Body. Some using these Anointings once a Day, some twice, others three times, and four times, others; the Patient being shut up in a Stove, with continual and fervent Heat, some twenty, Some thirty whole Days. Some lying in Bed within the Stove were thus anointed, and covered with many Clothes, being compelled to sweat; Part at the second anointing began to faint; yet was the Ointment of such Strength, that whatsoever Distemper was in the upper Parts it drew it into the Stomach, and thence to the Brain; and so the Disease was voided both by the Nose and Mouth, and put the Patient to So great a Pain, that except they took good heed, their Teeth fell our, and their Throats, their Lungs, and the Roofs of their Mouths were full of Sores; their Jaws did Swell, their Teeth loosen’d, and a stinking Matter continually was voided from these Places. What Part soever it touched, the same was straight corrupted thereby, so that not only their lips, but the inside of their cheeks, were grievously pained, and made the Place where they were, stink most abominably; which Sort of Cure was indeed so terrible, that many chose rather to die than to be eased thus of their Sickness. Howbeit, scarce one sick Person in a hundred could be cured in this Way, but quickly after relapsed, so that the Cure held but for a few Days. Whereby may be infer’d what I suffered in the same Disease, who underwent the same in this Fashion for eleven times, with great Peril and Jeopardy of Life, struggling with the Disease nine Years together, taking all the time whatever was thought proper to withstand the Disease; such as Baths with Herbs, Drinks and Corrosives, of which kind we had arsnick,
ink, Calcantum, Verdegrease and aquafortis, which occasioned such bitter Pains, that those might be thought very desirous of Life, who had not rather die than thus to prolong it. For these Curings were exceedingly painful that were set upon by these ignorant men, who knew nothing of their operation. [. . . ]

CHAP. VI: Of the Description of Guajacum, the Name, and Discovery

If we ought to give God thanks both for Good and Evil, how much are we bound for his Gift of Guajacam; yea, how much doth the Joy and Gladness for this his Bounty to us, surpass the Pains and Sorrow of our past Sickness.

The Use of this Wood was brought to us from the Island of Spagnola [Hispaniola], which lies Westward to the Country of America, beginning in that Place where the said Country, stretching Northwards, has its Termination, and was discovered of late among the New found Lands, which were unknown to our Fore-Fathers.

All the Inhabitants of that Place are at some times diseased with this Sickness, as we are with the Measles and Small-Pox; nor have they any surer remedy therefore than this.

A certain nobleman in Spain being Treasurer of his Province, was sadly afflicted with this Sickness; and when the People of the Island had taught him this Remedy, he brought the Manner and Use thereof into Spain, showing us of what Power and Virtue it was in those Parts.

The Physicians would not at first allow it, perceiving that their Profit was like to decay thereby, though at length they took in hand the Cure by Means of the same Wood, yet with much Arrogancy attributing so much to their own Orders and Precepts, that except they were followed, they affirmed that this Wood would be used to little Profit; which thing I much wonder they could persuade any Man to believe, seeing it is plainly known in that Island [there] were no Physicians, yet the said Wood hath always been used there successfully for this Malady. But as to what part of the Cure belongs to the Physician, I will presently declare. [. . . ]
They say it groweth like an Ash with us in Height and Compass, bearing a Nut like that of our Chestnut. The Wood is unctuous and fat, in Color like Box, but blacker, and that is deemed best which is blackest; [. . . ] or to speak more plainly, the black is as it were the Heart and Marrow. The Wood is wondrous heavy, for the least piece thereof sinketh strait when cast into Water. Neither is any Wood so hard as it, being almost impossible to cleave the same, they who sell it affirming to us that it Will not bear chopping, nor being riven asunder, after the manner of other timber. When burnt or flaming, it sendeth forth a Sweet Odor, and whilst burning there flows forth a Gum, whose Virtue is yet unknown to us. This Gum is somewhat black, and soon after it falls off, grows hard. The Bark is not so thick but exceeding hard likewise; which Signs, well observed, I think we cannot easily be deceived by any Counterfeit. [. . . ]

CHAP. VII: Of the ordering of Guajacum for the Cure of this Disease

Which is to be prepared after the following manner, viz. The Wood is first to be made as small as you can, which thing some do at the Turner’s Shop, and then without more ado they steep the Shavings or Raspings. Some do first pound or stamp them in the Mortar with design to bring them into Powder like Dust, so that the shavings may the sooner and more thoroughly be steeped, and their Virtue after boiled out. But I know not if this be absolutely necessary. I have seen Some that have made use of the Saw, and after rasping the Pieces with a Rasp, then put it into Water. Howsoever it be prepared, whether turned, pounded, sawed, or rasped, they are to be Soaked a Day and Night, one Pound Weight in eight pounds of Water, taken either from a Well, River, or as I did, from the Pit. Then they seeth [boil?] it in a new glazed Pot or Pipkin over a gentle Fire for the Space of six Hours, or more, till one half be consumed, taking care that it not boil over through too great or fervent Heat, which will render the Liquor of less Virtue and Strength; and therefore they will not allow it to be seethed over the Flame, but with a little Fire only, and the Pot not filled by almost a third Part. The Scum that riseth they take off to anoint the Sores with, the scum having great Power to dry. When
it is thus Sodden it is poured out into Glass Bottles, and then to the Grounds they put eight Pounds or Pints more of Water, seething it again as before, like a second mashing. This smaller is given as common Drink with Food, the first being taken by way of Medicine. And this is it which altogether delivers the Sick from this so great and grievous Disease. This Decoction, I say, is our only Remedy, the chief Point and Anchor of our Health, which hath so little need of any other thing, that it will not abide any Mixture or Mingling. [. . . ]

CHAP. XIII: Whether this Wood will cure in all Places

I expect now that some will enquire of me whether the Use and Effect of Gua-jacum be every where alike? And also being new and strange, whether or not it may be as convenient for the Germans as the Spaniards, and for those who live temperately as such Who live otherwise? For as in some other [remedies] regard is had to the Nature of the Place, so likewise ought it to be in the ministering hereof: As the time also of the Year is observed, so likewise the Place of the Sky or Climate are considered upon many Accounts, especially since Men abide Hunger otherwise in a thick Air than in a thin; but these I shall leave to the Physicians for a more satisfactory discussing of them. What I have learned, and as much as seemeth to appertain to my Countrymen the Germans, I will make publick to all.

The Spaniards say this Medicine ought to be prescribed to those sick with this Disease, be they of any Country or Nation whatsoever, seeing more especially there is nothing required in its use but what will suit all People and all Places indifferently, as hath been experienced already among diverse Countries. First from Spagnola it came into Spain, and then other adjoining Countries made Experiment with like Benefit. When after it was known that many had used it with great Success, the Sicilians received it; from them it was brought into Italy, and soon after we of Germany have found the good Effects thereof against this Distemper. And of late we have heard that many in France are in like manner healed thereby. We of Germany, having strong Bodies that
may well bear Labor, Hunger and Thirst, our Minds also for the most inclinable to Mirth and Merriment, what should cause any one to think but that our Region and People are admirably well suited to this Remedy? [. . .] But if we had not seen some restored unto Health through the help of Guajacum, and now were to begin the Proof, why should we think that God was so much set against us, that he would either withhold this health-bringing Medicine from us, or deprive us only of its Benefit? For being brought out of the New-Found-Land to Spain, it was there found to retain its Virtue: Unless any Man will say that Guajacum disdaineth to come to us, or being brought among us, that its Virtue ceases here, though nowhere else; whereas on the contrary, to our Comfort, it is found with us a sure and speedy Help, peradventure much more so among us, than in many other Places; for as our Men are much given to surfeiting, So can they, if need require, abide for a long time both Hunger and Thirst. As our Bodies likewise abound with Heat, so also they are hearty and strong. For after the Judgment of Aristotle, they who inhabit cold Countries have much natural Heat in them, and they who have much Heat, for the most part have greatest Strength; also the Almayns [Germans], being used to much eating and drinking, Riccius the Physician was asked of late, whether he thought it best to remit somewhat unto them of this very slender Diet? And he answer’d, “No, by St. Mary, not thus much; rather handle them, saith he, the straitlier [stricter], that their great Bellies, used to Gluttony and Drinking, be kept to a stricter Diet than what is practiced by those thin and lean Italians. And he showed me at the same time, that he had lately thus punished with Hunger one of these fat-gut Fellows, ten Days longer than otherwise he ought, because he would have no Humors remaining in him that might frustrate his Cure, by hindering the Operation of the Wood.

CHAP. XV: That those who are under this Cure must abstain both from Wine and Women

And may I not boldly affirm this Medicine to be given us of God, seeing it never helpeth unless a Man be given to Penance, and to lead a holy Life; for certainly Men are
brought into His Favor by two Virtues more especially, that is by Chastity and Abstinence, as the Christian Law sets forth. Let the Sick of this Disease assure himself therefore, that unless he will strictly bind himself under those Bonds, he will not only use this Remedy in vain, but shall run himself thereby into great Peril of Life; for it is known that a Man will die without Remedy, who useth a Woman before the fortieth Day, from the beginning of his Cure; either because the Body so emptied is not able to bear the Injury of that act, or because God will not have a Man use this so great Benefit impurely; and therefore among all those who experienced this Wood in Almayn, it happened one Man to die through his Folly, as those who were present affirmed upon their Oaths.

Next to this the use of Wine is known most dangerous, and must be avoided in this Cure, for it weakeneth the Joints, and is a known Enemy to the Nerves; and for as much as it is very penetrating and disturbing to the whole Body, it is thought that this Decoction of Guajacum will be as little Profit to his Body that useth Wine, but may rather put him in Jeopardy of his Life, so contrary are the Effects of Wine and Guajacum to each other.

There are some therefore, and that prudently, who admonisheth the Sick that he abstain from Wine a Month at least after the time of his Curation is past, in as much as the Remedy still keepeth its Course of operating many Days after it has been taken. Therefore lest anything hinder such working in the Body, they forbid Wine; and he that would flee other voluptuous Gratifications, must give no place to Gluttony; for the old Proverb tells us, that Hunger never begets Adultery. And again it is said, That Venus herself grows cold without Bread and Wine.

Celsus [the Roman physician] maketh mention of some who were very much vexed with grievous Aches in their Limbs, that by one Year’s entire Abstinence from Wine and Women have been freed therefrom for their whole Lives after; and the same concludes, that such as live pure or chaste, or are gelt [castrated], or Children, or those who meddle not with Women, or Women also (unless they are under the menstrual Suppression), are rarely afflicted with this Sickness. Alexander saith, those who drink
Water only, are more acute in all their Faculties of Understanding and Sense than others; for Wine stupifieth the same and dulls the Senses. [. . . ] Venus also, in whatever state a Man may be, cooleth the Body and drieth it also, if Aristotle be in the right; for by this act his natural Heat is extinguished, and by such Expence as is then made, Dryness also of the Body will ensure. And thus you see how Soberness and Chastity, two holy Ordinances of Life, are very principal Observations in this Cure, and highly conducive thereunto.