

Bleak Health: Charles Dickens's Medical History Revisited

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SCHOLARS OF DICKENS have shown that the author suffered from a range of illnesses throughout his life, yet the medical background to some of his ailments has often proved elusive.¹ He carried a medicine chest with him when he went to America in 1842², Italy and Switzerland in 1853³ and America in 1867.⁴ Dickens wrote over 14,000 letters,⁵ which provide a valuable insight into his medical history. In this article, I propose some new diagnoses gleaned from his correspondence and provide more detail on other medical conditions suffered by Dickens. Unfortunately, we do not have access to the letters Dickens received as he burnt them when he was living at Gad's Hill Place.

Colds and Influenza

Dickens suffered with numerous colds throughout his life, recording a total 47 episodes in his correspondence between 1832 and 1868. He sometimes had more than one attack a year: in 1844, for example, he had five episodes and in 1851, four. Naturally Dickens was not lost for words in describing his suffering. He used as many as 20 different adjectives⁶ to describe his colds, such as deplorable,⁷ intolerable,⁸ oppressive,⁹ hideous,¹⁰ villainous,¹¹ dreadful,¹² indescribable¹³ and monstrous¹⁴. On his second visit to America he called his persistent cold his 'true American'¹⁵ and later refers to it as 'My "true American catarrh" (the people seem to have a national pride in it)'.¹⁶

One example of how these colds affected him comes from a letter in 1835 to his future wife Catherine: 'My cold I am sorry to say is very bad indeed this morning, accompanied by a head-ache, and all the unpleasanties which usually follow in its train. If it should be a damp night, and the fog should continue, would you advise me to stay at home, take some gruel, try hot water for my feet, and go to bed early?'¹⁷ He was plainly looking for sympathy from his future bride. The treatments Dickens tried included mustard poultices to the chest and neck, foot baths, camphor liniment to the back and drinking barley water. The complications he suffered following these colds included sinus infection, chest infection, wheezing and ear infections.

Dickens suffered two episodes of influenza, in January 1855¹⁸ and in December 1857¹⁹, and fortunately recovered without any complications such as sinusitis or a chest infection as far as we know.

Rheumatism of the face or Tic Douloureux

Dickens suffered with at least 10 episodes of what he called 'rheumatism in the face'²⁰. One early episode, when he was 20, was to have a major influence on his future career. He was invited to go for a theatre audition by George Bartley²¹ in the presence of Charles Kemble²² and was unable to go due to his facial pain.²³

In one letter, Dickens named this ailment, which involved only one side of his face, as 'tic dolooureux [sic]'.²⁴ Also known as trigeminal neuralgia (inflammation of the fifth cranial nerve which causes severe facial pain), this was first described by Dr John Fothergill (1712–80) in 1773.²⁵ These episodes were often described by Dickens as 'insupportable torture'²⁶ and at one point he even refers to 'tearing myself to pieces' in performing *The Frozen Deep*, with the added affliction of 'Neuralgia in my face'²⁷. He treated these episodes with laudanum²⁸ and poultices to the face²⁹. On one occasion, writing to Lady Olliffe from Dover, he said, 'I have run away to the sea beach to get rid of my Neuralgic face.'³⁰ From Dickens's accounts of these severe recurrent facial pains I believe his diagnosis of tic douloureux³¹ was correct.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

Dickens developed a ritualistic routine in his domestic life, together with an obsessive approach to work, which is consistent with what we now term Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. He regularly inspected his children's bedrooms, leaving notes for them when he was not satisfied with their tidiness, and had a habit of rearranging furniture whenever he stayed in a hotel room. During a visit to Bath in 1840, for example, he wrote to his wife Catherine: 'Of course I arranged both the room and my luggage before going to bed, and had everything very tidy'.³² Another time, on his tour of America in 1842, he wrote, 'everything is in the neatest order, of course; and my shaving tackle, dressing case, brushes, books, and papers, are arranged with as much precision as if we were going to remain here for a month.'³³ Later in a letter to John Forster he wrote, 'I desire no better for my fame when my personal dustyness [sic] shall be past the controul [sic] of my love of order,.....'.³⁴

Gonorrhoea

Dickens suffered with what appears to have been gonorrhoea. In 1859, at the age of 47, and having been separated from Catherine the previous year, he wrote a letter to Frank Beard, his personal doctor, to say: 'My bachelor state has engendered a small malady on which I want to see you. I am at Gad's Hill for the summer, but have come up [to London] this morning on purpose.'³⁵ One week later Dickens wrote again to Beard: 'Will you call

upon me here today, after you leave home? I shall expect you between 1 and 2, but, anyway, will wait until you come. What I principally want to know is, whether your medicine irritates my skin. In other respects, I hope I'm certainly better.³⁶ Gonorrhoea was frequently treated with silver nitrate which could have caused the rash Dickens refers to, although it could equally have been due to disseminated gonorrhoea. A further clue about the diagnosis of gonorrhoea comes in a letter from Dickens to Wilkie Collins: 'I want very much to come to Old Broadstairs for a day, but cannot see my way there yet: having to pick up the story, and to blaze away with an eye to October. But I don't give it up; far from it. I really do hope to come for a day, before your time is up. Perhaps a tumble into the sea might – but I suppose there is no nitrate of Silver in the Ocean?'³⁷

There are signs that Dickens's father, John Dickens, may also have suffered from gonorrhoea. John Dickens died in 1851 six days after an operation performed without chloroform by a surgeon named Robert Wade³⁸. Dickens described the scene graphically as a 'slaughter house of blood.'³⁹ It has been suggested by W.H. Bowen, that John Dickens had a bladder stone causing urinary retention. Bowen makes this diagnosis based on the medical certificate issued to John Dickens, at the age of 39, when he applied for a pension and retirement during his first detention in the Marshalsea, the debtors' prison, in 1824. John Pool, a surgeon, of Davis Street, Piccadilly, then wrote that John Dickens was suffering from an infirmity of the body 'arising from a chronic affection of the urinary organs'.⁴⁰ However, there is a clue in John Dickens's death certificate to suggest an alternative diagnosis. The certificate gave the cause of death as 'Rupture of the Urethra from old standing stricture and consequent mortification of the scrotum from infiltration of urine'.⁴¹ Robert Wade was the author of *Practical Observations on Stricture of the Urethra* and that is the likely reason why he was asked to treat John Dickens. Therefore, this would suggest that a urethral stricture had caused the urinary retention. A further clue lies in a letter which Dickens wrote the day his father died. He said: 'He [John Dickens] had kept his real malady so profoundly secret, that when he did disclose it his state was most alarmingly advanced towards this sad end.'⁴² Gonorrhoea was a major cause of urethral strictures in those pre-antibiotic days. It is highly likely, therefore, that John Dickens had previously suffered from gonorrhoea.

Chronic carbon monoxide poisoning

Dickens made two visits to America - from January to May 1842 and from November 1867 to April 1868. During these visits, he travelled long distances by railway in carriages which were heated by charcoal stoves and unventilated. It is now known that such stoves produced carbon monoxide,

an odourless and colourless gas. In high concentrations, carbon monoxide can be fatal while in lower concentrations it can cause debilitating symptoms. General symptoms may include dizziness, fatigue and weakness. Neurological symptoms include headache, drowsiness, disorientation and fits; gastrointestinal symptoms include nausea, vomiting and stomach pains; and cardiac symptoms include chest pain, wheeziness, palpitations and hyperventilation. The commonest symptoms are headache (90%), nausea and vomiting (50%), vertigo (50%), altered states of consciousness (30%) and weakness (20%).

During his 1842 visit Dickens describes what it was like to be a passenger in one of these train carriages:

The cars [train carriages] are like very shabby omnibuses - only larger; holding sixty or seventy people. The seats, instead of being placed long ways, are put cross-wise, back to front. Each holds two. There is a long row of these on each side of the caravan, and a narrow passage up the centre. The windows are usually all closed, and there is very often, in addition, a hot, close, most intolerable charcoal stove in a red-hot glow. The heat and closeness are quite insupportable. But this is the characteristic of all American houses, of all the public institutions, chapels, theatres, and prisons.⁴³

Dickens goes on to describe the effect such stoves had upon passengers' health: 'From the constant use of hard anthracite coal⁴⁴ in these beastly furnaces, a perfectly new class of diseases is springing up in the country. Their effect upon an Englishman is briefly told. He is always very sick and very faint; and has an intolerable headache, morning, noon and night.'⁴⁵ From this statement Dickens was aware of the effects such stoves had on his health as well as on others.

On Dickens's second American visit 25 years later, lasting five months, he undertook a reading tour which entailed travelling extensively by train and staying in hotels. In one letter he says that as well as having a frightful cold he felt exceedingly depressed and miserable. He refers to travelling by train together with one hundred people in a heated car containing a huge stove with all the windows closed, and describes the atmosphere as detestable. Following this train journey, he mentioned that he was unable to get out of bed until two o'clock the following afternoon.⁴⁶ Throughout his correspondence during this second American visit, he regularly mentions that he suffered with a variety of debilitating symptoms including headaches, poor sleep, loss of appetite, lethargy and hair loss - all of which would support a diagnosis of carbon monoxide poisoning.

It is possible that Dickens believed his symptoms were all due to what he called 'American catarrh' [a cold] which he developed at the beginning of his five-month visit rather than to the effects of carbon monoxide from

these charcoal stoves. As previously discussed, Dickens seemed to suffer badly from colds. He may also have attributed his tiredness and other symptoms to travelling long distances while staying in different hotels plus the effort required for his readings.

It should be noted that carbon monoxide binds itself to the haemoglobin in blood 240 times more tightly than oxygen. This means that all parts of the body requiring oxygen would be unable to function properly due to reduced oxygen levels, thereby causing the symptoms previously described. Regular exposure to carbon monoxide from these stoves would result in people always having a significant level of carboxyhaemoglobin in their blood stream until they are free of exposure. In Dickens's case, this would have been on his return journey to England by sailing ship. This fits with Dickens's case, since he mentions in one letter that his 'American catarrh' cleared up after only four days at sea and his appetite had returned too to the extent that he had made a Gad's Hill breakfast that morning.⁴⁷ Three weeks earlier, while still in Boston, in a letter to his daughter Mary Dickens, he wrote that his appetite was poor and he was having to rely on the following regime:

I cannot eat (to anything like the ordinary extent), and have established this system: At seven in the morning, in bed, a tumbler of new cream and two tablespoonsful of rum. At twelve, a sherry cobbler and a biscuit. At three (dinner time), a pint of champagne. At five minutes to eight, an egg beaten up with a glass of sherry. Between the parts, the strongest beef tea that can be made, drunk hot. At a quarter-past ten, soup, and anything to drink that I can fancy. I don't eat more than half a pound of solid food in the whole four-and-twenty hours, if so much.⁴⁸

Although Dickens suffered with a cold ('American catarrh') when he first arrived in America, it is very unusual for a cold to persist for five months and suddenly resolve after four days at sea. Therefore, a likely diagnosis of his prolonged symptoms would fit with chronic carbon monoxide poisoning.

Renal Colic and Gout

From childhood Dickens had suffered with episodes of agonising, intermittent spasms in his left side. On one occasion when he was working in the Blacking Factory his friend Bob Fagin made a temporary bed of straw for him to lie on and filled empty blacking-bottles with hot water and applied them to his left side.⁴⁹ These spasms are highly likely to have been due to renal colic caused by uric acid kidney stones. As Dickens grew older he mentions suffering 12 episodes of these spasms between the years 1834 and 1867. He described these episodes as 'rheumatism in my

back⁵⁰, 'exquisite torture from the spasm in my side'⁵¹, and 'ecstasy [*sic*] of pain.'⁵²

Treatments Dickens used to treat his renal colic included hydrocyanic acid⁵³, laudanum⁵⁴ to relieve the pain, henbane⁵⁵ to help reduce the spasm in the muscle surrounding the ureter and wearing a broad flannel belt around the waist.⁵⁶

Dickens had his first attack of gout in 1865⁵⁷ at the age of 53 and suffered with a further eight episodes after that. It is worth remembering that gout generally develops in three stages: stage 1: renal colic due to uric acid kidney stones; stage 2: gout; and stage 3: development of tophi (uric acid crystals in the soft tissues).

In Dickens's time, gout was often referred to as rheumatic gout. For example, in 1852 Dickens mentioned that his friend John Forster was very ill with rheumatic gout.⁵⁸ A year later, in 1853, Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893), a French physician, differentiated the two diseases.⁵⁹

In 1867, before Dickens's gout was formally diagnosed, he consulted Sir Henry Thompson (1820-1904), Professor of Clinical Surgery at University College Hospital, about his foot problems. Dickens wrote:

He [Henry Thompson] has gone into the case heartily, and says that there is no doubt the complaint originates in the action of the shoe, in walking, on an enlargement in the nature of a bunion. Erysipelas [infection in the tissues] has supervened upon the injury; and the object is to avoid a gathering, and to stay the erysipelas where it is. Meanwhile I am on my back and chafing.⁶⁰

However, Thompson later changed his diagnosis to gout. In February 1869, Dickens travelled to Scotland during his Farewell Tour, and saw James Syme (1799-1870), Professor of Clinical Surgery at Edinburgh University, who ridiculed the idea of gout.⁶¹ Syme agreed with Dickens that the trouble was due to walking in the snow and described the disease as 'an affection of the delicate nerves and muscles originating in cold.'⁶²

It is likely that Dickens's diet may have contributed to his complaint. Dickens enjoyed mutton chops, seafood and port, all rich in purines, which when metabolised in the liver would have raised the uric acid levels in his blood and caused gout. This is particularly true of port. In a letter to his wine merchant George Russell he wrote, 'the Port is excellent, and I shall be glad to take 6 dozen [bottles]'.⁶³

Treatments for gout which were tried by Dickens included laudanum⁶⁴ to relieve the pain, poppy poultices applied to the foot,⁶⁵ and wearing a special protective boot⁶⁶. A few weeks before his death Dickens purchased a voltaic band (which produced an electric current) to wear on his foot in an attempt to relieve his symptoms.⁶⁷

Finally, I believe that Dickens may have been in denial about his diagnosis of gout because his two close friends, John Forster⁶⁸ and Wilkie Collins⁶⁹, also suffered with the ailment and Dickens did not want to suffer as they did.

Post-traumatic stress disorder

In 1865 Charles Dickens was travelling by train, with Ellen Ternan and her mother, when they were involved in the Staplehurst railway derailment. Dickens tended several of the victims, some of whom died while he was with them. The day after the accident he wrote to his doctor, Beard, requesting a prescription for a draft or two.⁷⁰ The experience affected Dickens greatly; he lost his voice for two weeks⁷¹, found that he had a feeble pulse and that he was 'unfit for noise and worry'.⁷² Afterwards he became nervous when travelling by express train and used alternative means when available. This would suggest that he suffered with post-traumatic stress disorder.⁷³ Dickens died five years to the day after the accident; from which he had never fully recovered.

Headaches

Dickens suffered from numerous headaches later in his life due to a variety of reasons (some are described in this paper under different headings). In a letter to Thomas Mitton while on holiday at Petersham in 1839, when Dickens was 27, he writes: 'I – who never have a headache – have scarcely had anything else of late, but have been in a moping and heavy condition, at least six hours of the four and twenty.'⁷⁴ The cause of this headache is not known. However, causes could be due to tension, migraine, colds and sinusitis⁷⁵, which Dickens suffered with from time to time.

Asthma

There is sufficient evidence to show that Dickens and other family members suffered with asthma.⁷⁶ At times he suffered with episodes of wheezing and coughing as a complication of his colds and in 1844 he describes wheezing from morning until night.⁷⁷ In 1849, whilst on holiday in Bonchurch, he describes having a cough which was deep, monotonous, and constant.⁷⁸ Later in 1856 he wrote, 'All night I snort and wheeze'.⁷⁹ In 1868, during his reading tour of America, he describes suffering convulsive wheezes⁸⁰ and in a further letter he writes: 'I have coughed from two or three in the morning until five or six, and have been absolutely sleepless. I have had no appetite besides, and no taste. Last night here I took some laudanum, and it is the only thing that has done me good.'⁸¹ Unlike today, of course, there were no inhalers or steroids to treat asthma and patients had to rely on home remedies and Dover's powders.⁸²

Dental problems

In 1841, aged 29, Dickens first wrote about his dental problems when he suffered with toothache,⁸³ although he does not mention what treatment he received. There were various treatments for toothache at the time, including burning the nerve with a hot wire or destroying it by caustic, cajeput oil and oil of thyme.⁸⁴

From 1853 onwards Samuel Cartwright became his regular dentist and a private friend, whom he enjoyed dining with.⁸⁵ On one occasion Dickens remarked, 'I went out at 7 O'Clock to dine with Cartwright (I always feel a strange satisfaction in doing at least that much to my own teeth in his house), and could hardly get out at my own door, or at his.'⁸⁶ Later in 1855 he writes, 'I am going to Cartwright at 2 o'Clock tomorrow (he wants to chip for half an hour or so at my teeth, like Old Mortality at the tombstones) ..'⁸⁷ In 1856, Dickens had a tooth extracted⁸⁸ and in 1860 he wrote to Cartwright requesting 'some of your skilful overhauling.'⁸⁹ By 1867 a loose back tooth had fallen out⁹⁰ and two months later Dickens wrote to Cartwright requesting him to tighten up some loose teeth.⁹¹ This would suggest that Dickens was suffering with gum disease due to his increasingly poor health. A few weeks later Dickens wrote to Cartwright and said, 'I cannot but think when I come to consider these nice constructions, x that we must have been hurriedly below the mark of their cost this afternoon. Therefore, I have made a cheque for Fifteen Pounds, and now enclose it with Fifteen thousand thanks.'⁹² Dickens is most likely to have been fitted with a dental plate or denture. Later that year Dickens appears to have had problems with his voice, and conscious that he would soon be on his reading tour of America, accepted Cartwright's offer to see him. Dickens writes: 'It is very kind of you to offer your great skill in aid of my "Speaking department", and I thankfully accept the offer.'⁹³ A month before he set sail for America Dickens wrote to Cartwright, as he was having problems with fixing the dental plate into his mouth with his hands, asking him for his kind assistance.⁹⁴ Three weeks later, and shortly before departing for America, Dickens wrote to Cartwright again about his dental plate and said, 'I wore IT all day yesterday with great success. To-day, cannot get it in. It appears to the penitent undersigned that the left wire may be a little too long.'⁹⁵ Dickens wanted to be free of any dental problems whilst he was away and continued, 'He himself casts himself on your merciful consideration, and forlornly represents that he can't come to you when 4,000 miles off.'⁹⁶

Anal fistula and haemorrhoids

Dickens suffered with an anal fistula which became so severe that in 1841 he underwent an operation in his own home, without an anaesthetic,

performed by the London surgeon Frederick Salmon (1796-1868), who was the founder of St Mark's Hospital, City Road, London. After the operation, Dickens wrote to Beard:

My dear Beard. You will hardly believe it I dare say, for I can't, but I have been very ill for a week, and last Friday Morning was obliged to submit to a cruel operation, and the cutting out root and branch of a disease caused by working over much which has been gathering it seems for years. Thank God, it's all over and I am on the Sofa again - rather lean but filling the Doctor with boundless astonishment notwithstanding. Kate to whom I dictate this sends all kinds of loves. When you have time, come and see me.⁹⁷

One of Dickens's friends, Francis Dalziel Finlay, also had an operation for an anal fistula and Dickens offered him some valuable advice and wrote: 'You know by this time, I may assume, the importance of always using an open-work cane chair? I can testify that there is nothing quite like it. Even in this episodic hotel-life, I invariably have my cane chair brought from a bedroom...'⁹⁸

Dickens also suffered with three episodes of rectal bleeding due to haemorrhoids or piles. In 1867 while in Glasgow he writes to Beard:

Occasionally, as you know, I have some slight inconvenience (but not much) from piles. Yesterday night, having travelled hard and been much fatigued, I took one of Brinton's pills. This morning I have lost a considerable quantity of blood. Will you tell me, - shall I do anything except take a gentle aperient? If yes, what shall I do?

... If you should think any *immediate* direction necessary in circumstances where my efficiency is all important, will you telegraph? My "treatment" on my own hook will be (as usual) regularity of bowels, cold baths and good regular living. But I shall declare on claret until you instruct me.⁹⁹

Two years later, in 1869, Dickens wrote to Beard: 'I have an occasional return of that effusion of blood from piles. Will you kindly send me the receipt [prescription] that did me so much good before?'¹⁰⁰ A few months before he died, Dickens writes to Forster: 'My uneasiness and haemorrhage, after having quite left me, as I supposed, has come back with an aggravated irritability that it has not yet displayed. You have no idea what state I am in today from a sudden violent rush of it; and yet it has not the slightest effect on my general health that I know of.'¹⁰¹

Steel and strong acids

In 1863 Dickens writes: 'I have a ridiculous swelling in the back of my head which wants to be something troublesome. To be beforehand with it in its

amiable intentions, my Doctor “treats” me with steel and strong acids, and lays special injunctions on me not to dine late or to go into hot rooms until he has done with me.¹⁰² The reference to steel suggests that his doctor had to use a scalpel either to dissect it out or lance the swelling. The swelling is therefore likely to have been a sebaceous cyst (wen) or a carbuncle (an infection of the skin that may be filled with pus).

Accidents

In 1844 whilst on a holiday in Italy Dickens ran into a pole fastened straight across the street, nearly breast high, and went headlong over it. It was midnight and there was no light or a watchman present. Dickens tore his clothes to shreds and suffered only with a scratch on one knee. The following day he suffered with ‘the old and unspeakable and agonizing pain in the side and yielded to powerful remedies.’¹⁰³

A few years later, in 1847, Dickens travelled down to Chertsey for a hunting expedition and was bitten by a horse, which led to a potentially serious injury which also shook Dickens severely. In a letter to Lord Robertson, Dickens writes:

I should have been to see you before now, but on Monday last I drove down to Chertsey Cottage hunting: and one of the horses I drove took it into his head (I believe under the impression that I had gone into his stall to steal his corn, which upon my honor I had no intention of doing) to make a sudden attack upon me in the stable, tear my coat sleeve and my shirt sleeve off, and very nearly take the great muscle of my arm with it. As it was, however, he merely struck the arm with his teeth and head, but bruised it so, that I have worn a poultice ever since, and am still invested with that decoration.¹⁰⁴

This episode clearly affected Dickens deeply. He writes: ‘I have been very unwell these last few days, with a low dull nervousness of a most distressing kind - a rare complaint with me -but I hope I am getting over it, and seem to have a faint consciousness of myself again this morning.’¹⁰⁵ Later in 1861 he recalled the incident with the horse:

I had a nervous seizure in the throat (occasioned by an attack that was made upon me by a horse), which distressed me greatly at intervals for a long time; distressed me more fearfully than I could ever tell anybody, or ever shall tell now. I found that I derived greater relief from smelling to some violent and pungent scent, whenever the thing came strongly upon me, than from anything else. Try this, and I am sure you will find benefit. I went so far as to buy the strongest High dried Welch snuff, and persistently to take it when I felt worst. It always relieved me.¹⁰⁶

He later went on to mention another medication he took:

Dr Elliotson¹⁰⁷ at the same time recommended me to go to Twinberrow's, chemists, Edwards Street Portman Square, and buy a bottle of his extract of Wormwood, and take certain drops of it (the dose is marked upon the bottle), in a wine glass of water, twice a day. Its effect upon the nervous system is wholesome in the highest degree, and it can be taken when no other tonic can be borne. It is intensely bitter, and that is all. Now do try that also.¹⁰⁸

In 1849 Dickens had a slight fall which he disregarded. However, the following day he wrote that he had 'some uncomfortable local consequences that oblige me to be cupped (bled), and laid up in ordinary on a sofa for the next four and twenty hours.'¹⁰⁹

During his Farewell Tour in 1869 Dickens suffered with a cut shin after an accident in the theatre. He describes what happened in a letter written from the Adelphi Hotel in Liverpool:

Going down to the Theatre in the dark this morning (it is an exceedingly dark stage by daylight), I tripped over an extra "stay" of strong galvanised wire, used for my batten, which is much higher than usual. I brought myself up without being pitched into the pit, but cut the shin of my left leg rather smartly, and have had to bathe it and bind it up surgically. A little unfortunate, for it is a bad place to heal.¹¹⁰

Depression

Dickens suffered from bouts of depression at various times during his life. In 1844, he wrote to John Pritt Harley: 'I am so much depressed and worried by an intolerable cold, that I am obliged, with a view to tomorrow's work, to deny myself the pleasure of dining with you.'¹¹¹ Later, in 1847, in a letter to the Revd Edward Tagart he writes: 'I had gone to Geneva to recover from an uncommon depression of spirits, consequent on too much sitting over Dombey and the little Christmas Book.'¹¹²

In 1849 whilst on holiday in Bonchurch Dickens suffered with depression and wrote a long letter to Forster describing his feelings:

The first salubrious effect of which the Patient becomes conscious is an almost continual feeling of sickness, accompanied with great prostration of strength, so that his legs tremble under him, and his arms quiver when he wants to take hold of any object. An extraordinary disposition to sleep (except at night, when his rest, in the event of his having any, is broken by incessant dreams) is always present at the same time; and, if he have anything to do requiring thought and attention, this overpowers him to such a degree that he can only do it in snatches: lying down on beds in the fitful intervals. Extreme depression of mind, and a disposition to shed tears from morning to night, develops itself at the same period. If the Patient happen to have been a good walker, he finds ten miles an insupportable distance; in the achievement of which his legs are

so unsteady, that he goes from side to side of the road. When he brushes his hair in the morning, he is so weak that he is obliged to sit upon a chair to do it. He is incapable of reading, at all times. And his bilious system is so utterly overthrown, that a ball of boiling fat appears to be always behind the top of the bridge of his nose, simmering between his haggard eyes.¹¹³

Following this passage, Dickens refers to his deep, monotonous and constant bark characteristic of asthma which has been discussed earlier and must have been a contributory factor to his low mood and depression.¹¹⁴

Many years later, on his reading tour of America in 1867-68, he wrote to his daughter Mary Dickens: 'I got your aunt's last letter at Boston yesterday, Christmas Day morning, when I was starting at eleven o'clock to come back to this place. I wanted it very much, for I had a frightful cold (English colds are nothing to those of this country), and was exceedingly depressed and miserable.'¹¹⁵ However, by March 1868 Dickens's depression seems to have become even more severe. He writes: 'I am beginning to be tired, and have been depressed all the time (except when reading), and have lost my appetite.'¹¹⁶ During Dickens's lifetime there were no anti-depressants like there are today and people had to try and overcome it as best they could. In Dickens's and Dr Samuel Johnson's case, they used to go on long walks to overcome their depression.

Heart problems and Stroke

In 1865, aged 53, Dickens suffered with the first of two mild strokes (also called transient ischaemic attacks, which are due to a temporary interruption of blood-flow to the brain). At the time Dickens was unaware how serious these warning signs were and this was an early indication of his final stroke.

In 1865 whilst on holiday in Paris Dickens suffered with what appears to be a mild stroke although he attributed this to 'slight sunstroke'. The fact that he 'was obliged to be doctored and put to bed for a day' suggests that this episode was far more serious than Dickens had imagined.¹¹⁷

In 1866 Dickens noticed an alteration in his pulse and Beard recommended Dickens should see William Brinton (1823-67), a physician. Following the consultation Dickens wrote: 'There seems to be degeneration of some functions of the heart. It does not contract as it should. So, I have got a prescription of iron, quinine and digitalis, to set it a going, and send the blood more quickly through the system.'¹¹⁸ This episode together with the mild stroke would suggest that Dickens had generalised disease of the cardiovascular system affecting the arteries and the heart.

On 20 April 1869, whilst in Bolton on the Farewell Tour, Dickens suffered a mild stroke which affected the left side of his body.¹¹⁹ Beard immediately travelled up to Blackpool to meet Dickens and brought

Tuesday February 15th 1870.
 Pulse before reading Probs at the Holly Tree
 Nancy & Sykes (the Murders) 90. after 124. after
 reading "flumps" 110. 20 minutes after 74.

Monday February 22nd 1870.
 Pulse before reading Pickens, the Holly 84 after 106.
 after reading "chops" 112 after 18 minutes 84.

Tuesday March 1st 1870.
 Pulse before reading David Copperfield 100
 after 124. after deal from Pickens 124
 15 minutes after 100. —

Tuesday March 8th 1870.
 Pulse before reading Probs at the Holly Tree
 94 after reading 112. after reading
 Nancy & Sykes (the Murders) 120. after
 reading Rob Foy's party 100. 15 minutes
 after 74. —

Tuesday March 15th 1870.
 Pulse before reading Christmas Carol 100
 after reading 110. after reading deal from Pickens 110
 15 minutes after 94. Twenty minutes after
 that 94. —

Notes by Dr. Francis Carr Beard on Dickens's pulse rate during the Farewell Readings in London on 15 and 22 February and 1, 8 and 15 March 1869. Charles Dickens Museum, London.

him back to London to see Sir Thomas Watson (1792-1882), an eminent physician, who advised him to reduce his workload. Both Beard and Watson signed a medical certificate prohibiting further readings.¹²⁰ However, nine months later Dickens resumed his readings only after obtaining permission from Sir Thomas Watson. He gave a total of 12 readings between 11 January and 15 March 1870 at St James's Hall, London. And 'Mr Beard found such a marked change for the worse in the general condition of his patient,

that he thought it advisable to be present at the Readings, in order to note carefully their visible effects on his health'.¹²¹ Beard also decided to monitor Dickens's pulse before and after his readings.¹²²

Another significant and worrying neurological symptom Dickens developed was pointed out by Forster, who said that Dickens had told him that 'as he came along, walking up the length of Oxford-street, the same incident had recurred as on the day of a former dinner with us, and he had not been able to read, all the way, more than the right-hand half of the names over the shops'.¹²³ Dickens believed that 'he had the old fixed persuasion that this was rather the effect of a medicine he had been taking than any grave cause, and he still believed his other troubles to be exclusively local'.¹²⁴ Three months later, on 8 June 1870, Dickens aged 58, suffered a severe stroke ['apoplexy' was the Cause of Death on Dickens's death Certificate] at Gad's Hill and died the following day.¹²⁵ He was buried in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey on 14 June 1870.

Endnotes

- 1 W.H. Bowen's book: *Charles Dickens and his Family – A Sympathetic Study*, Cambridge, 1956, contains a chapter on 'The Medical History of Charles Dickens', pp.134-159. Hereafter abbreviated to W.H. Bowen. A more recent paper explores some of Dickens's illnesses. Carol McLeod, 'Dickens's Maladies Re-Evaluated', *Dickensian*, vol. 87, 1991, pp.77-80. References to individual conditions can be found throughout this paper.
- 2 *Letters* vol.3, p.162, 22 March 1842.
- 3 *Letters* vol.7, p.158, 3 October 1853. In this letter Dickens orders medicines to fill the accompanying case of bottles, one with laudanum, one with sal volatile, and one with powdered ginger. Also, a large box, as it is to travel with us it should be strong, of the pills according to Dr Southwood [Smiths's] prescription which is in Mr Winkworth's possession.
- 4 David Dickens and Norman M. Jacoby, 'Charles Dickens's Travelling Medicine Chest', *Dickensian*; vol.92, 1996, pp.19-24. Hereafter abbreviated to Charles Dickens's Travelling Medicine Chest.
- 5 Madeline House and Graham Storey eds. *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 12 vols, The Clarendon Press, London, 1965-2002. Hereafter abbreviated to *Letters*. There are over 400 other letters on the Charles Dickens Letters Project published since Pilgrim.
- 6 Bad, severe, annoying, worst, deplorable, horrible, intolerable, oppressive, hideous, terrible, villainous, dreadful, frightful, heavy, abominable, monstrous, dismal, tremendous, ponderous and indescribable.
- 7 *Letters* vol.2, p.150, 14 November 1840.
- 8 *Letters* vol.12, p.4, 3 January 1868.
- 9 *Letters* vol.3, p.580, 13 October 1843.
- 10 *Letters* vol.3, p.581, 13 October 1843.
- 11 *Letters* vol.4, p.333, 16 July 1845.
- 12 *Letters* vol.4, p.681, 19 December 1846.
- 13 *Letters* vol.9, p.303, 4 September 1860.
- 14 *Letters* vol.5, p.594, 15 August 1849.
- 15 *Letters* vol.12, p.15, 15 January 1868.
- 16 *Letters* vol.12, p.19, 18 January 1868. The word 'true American' is mentioned six times in Dickens's correspondence during this American tour.
- 17 *Letters* vol.1, p.86 [?30 October 1835].

- 18 *Letters* vol.7, p.518, 31 January 1855.
- 19 *Letters* vol.8, p.487, 6 December 1857.
- 20 *Letters* vol.1, p.199, [?27 November 1836]. This episode had lasted for a week.
- 21 George Bartley (?1782-1858; DNB), stage-manager at the Covent Garden Theatre (1829-43).
- 22 Charles Kemble (1775-1854) was a British actor. In 1844-45 he gave readings from Shakespeare at Willis's Rooms. Macready regarded his Cassio as incomparable, and summed him up as 'a first-rate actor of second-rate parts.'
- 23 *Letters*, vol.4, pp.244-245, [? 30-31 December 1844]
- 24 *Letters* vol.2, p.130. Should be spelt Tic Douloureux.
- 25 John Fothergill, 'Of a painful affection of the face', in Society of Physicians in London: *Medical Observations and Inquiries*. London: T. Cadell, 1773, vol.5 pp.129-142.
- 26 *Letters* vol.2, p.130, 2 October 1840.
- 27 *Letters* vol.8, p.421, 28 August 1857.
- 28 Charles Dickens's Travelling Medicine Chest.
- 29 *Letters* vol.2, p.130, 2 October 1840.
- 30 *Letters* vol.9, p.421. 26 May 1861.
- 31 Tic douloureux must not be confused with tics. Tics are fast, repetitive muscle movements that result in sudden and difficult body jolts and sounds. Dr Samuel Johnson suffered with tics.
- 32 *Letters* vol.2, p.36. 1 March 1840.
- 33 *Letters* vol.3, p.181, 3 April 1842.
- 34 *Letters* vol.5, p.290, 22 April 1848.
- 35 *Letters* vol.9, p.84, 25 June 1859.
- 36 *Letters* vol.9, p.88, [1] July 1859.
- 37 *Letters* vol.9, p.106, 16 August 1859.
- 38 *Letters* vol.6, p.333n, 25 March 1851. Robert Wade, of 68 Dean Street, Soho; FRCS 1844; recently appointed Senior Surgeon to Westminster General Dispensary; formerly Surgeon to the Royal Infirmary for Children. Author of *Practical Observations on Stricture of the Urethra*, 1849, and medical and surgical articles.
- 39 *Letters* vol.6, p.333, 25 March 1851.
- 40 W.H. Bowen, p.136.
- 41 *Letters* vol.6, p.333, 25 March 1851, see footnote 4.
- 42 *Letters* vol.6, p.342, 31 March 1851.
- 43 *Letters* vol.3, p.100, 6 March 1842.
- 44 This can also apply to charcoal stoves.
- 45 *Letters* vol.3, p.100, 6 March 1842.
- 46 *Letters* vol.11, p.524, 26 and 27 December 1867.
- 47 *Letters* vol.12, p.99, [26] and 30 April 1868.
- 48 *Letters* vol.12, p.92, 7 April 1868.
- 49 John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, London, 1872, vol.1, p.40.
- 50 *Letters* vol.4, p.196, [?30 September 1844].
- 51 *Letters* vol.1, p.119, [?? 22 January 1836].
- 52 *Letters* vol.1, p.448, 1 November 1838.
- 53 *Letters* vol.1, p.120, [?22 January 1836] In the letter hydrocyanic acid is spelt hydroceanic acid by mistake.
- 54 *Letters* vol. 7, p.158, 3 October 1853. Dickens had his medicine chest with him whilst on holiday and always had some laudanum to treat painful conditions. This letter is from Dickens to Mr Winkworth, a chemist ordering medicines including landanum for his medicine chest.
- 55 *Letters* vol.1, p.448, 1 November 1838.
- 56 *Letters* vol.12, p.216, 5 November 1868.

- 57 *Letters* vol.11, p.19, 21 February 1865.
- 58 *Letters* Vol.6, p.682, 23 May 1852.
- 59 David R. Kumar et al, 'Jean-Martin Charcot: The Father of Neurology', *Clinical Medicine and Research*, 2011 Mar; 9(1): 46-49.
- 60 *Letters* vol.11, p.408, 6 August 1867.
- 61 *Letters* vol.12, p.296, [?23 February 1869].
- 62 *Letters* vol.12, p.301, 2 March 1869.
- 63 *Letters* vol.11, p.46, 23 May 1865.
- 64 Charles Dickens's Travelling Medicine Chest.
- 65 *Letters* vol.11, p.28, 21 March 1865.
- 66 *Letters* vol.12, p.296, [21 February 1869] and p.297, 25 February 1869.
- 67 *Letters* vol.12, p.543, 3 June 1870.
- 68 *Letters* vol.11, pp.468-469, 1 November 1867.
- 69 *Letters* vol.12, p.212, 30 October 1868.
- 70 *Letters* vol.11, p.49, 10 June 1865.
- 71 *Letters* vol.11, p.65, 29 June 1865.
- 72 *Letters* vol.11, p.63, 21 June 1865.
- 73 Catherine Aird, 'Dickens and Railway Spine Neurosis', *Dickensian*, vol.108, 2012, pp.25-8.
- 74 *Letters* vol.1, p.569, 26 July 1839.
- 75 *Letters* vol.11, p.200, 11 May 1866.
- 76 Norman M. Jacoby, 'Charles Dickens's asthma', *Journal of Medical Biography* 1995; 3:34-42.
- 77 *Letters* vol.4, p.120, 6 May 1844.
- 78 *Letters* vol.5, p.605, [late August 1849]
- 79 *Letters* vol.8, p.72, 15 March 1856.
- 80 *Letters* vol.12, p.17, 15 January 1868.
- 81 *Letters* vol.12, p.85, 29 March 1868.
- 82 Dover's powders contained a mixture of opium and ipecacuanha. They were used as a kind of sedative medicine, the first ingredient to reduce coughing and the second to encourage bronchial secretion.
- 83 *Letters* vol.2, p.224, [?4 or 5 March 1841].
- 84 Robert Hooper, *Medical Dictionary*, London, 1848, p.950.
- 85 *Letters* vol.7, p.27, 24 February 1853. Samuel Cartwright, Jnr (1815-91); Trinity College, Cambridge 1832, MRCS 1838, FRCS 1859; dental surgeon in practice in 32 Old Burleigh St, and like his father Samuel (1789-1864); DNB) a pioneer in dentistry and influential in raising of the profession. Already held many important posts, and in 1860 appointed to the Chair at King's College, London. A keen musician and member of musical societies; "greatly esteemed by CD, both in his professional capacity and as a private friend" (MDGH, II,326)
- 86 *Letters* vol.7, p.528, 9 February 1855.
- 87 *Letters* vol.7, p.615, 10 May 1855.
- 88 *Letters* vol.8, p.42, 5 February 1856.
- 89 *Letters* vol.9, p.205, 3 February 1860.
- 90 *Letters* vol.11, p.324, 2 March 1867.
- 91 *Letters* vol.11, p.360, 1 May 1867.
- 92 *Letters* vol.11, p.370, 22 May 1867. £15 in 1867 is equivalent to £975 today.
- 93 *Letters* vol.11, p.404, 26 July 1867. It must be remembered that Cartwright was a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons and had the Chair of Dental Surgery at King's College, London.
- 94 *Letters* vol.11, p.450, 8 October 1867.
- 95 *Letters* vol.11, p.466, 28 October 1867.

- 96 Ibid.
- 97 *Letters* vol.2, p.401, [12 October 1841].
- 98 *Letters* vol.11, p.337, 18 March 1867.
- 99 *Letters* vol.11, pp.316-317, 18 February 1867.
- 100 *Letters* vol.12, p.331, 13 April 1869.
- 101 *Letters* vol.12, p.502, 29 March 1870.
- 102 *Letters* vol.10, p.263, 26 June 1863.
- 103 *Letters* vol.4, pp.187-188, [?31 August 1844]
- 104 *Letters* vol.5, p.65, 6 May 1847.
- 105 *Letters* vol.5, p.66, 10 May 1847.
- 106 *Letters* vol.9, p.521, 25 November 1861.
- 107 John Elliotson (1791-1868), English physician who advocated the use of hypnosis in therapy and who in 1849 founded a mesmeric hospital. He was one of the first teachers in London to emphasise clinical lecturing and was one of the earliest British physicians to urge the use of the stethoscope. After studying medicine at the University of Edinburgh, at the University of Cambridge, and in London hospitals, Elliotson taught at London University (now University College). In 1834, he became physician to University College, where his interest in hypnosis led to conflicts with the hospital's medical committee and his resignation in 1838. He was a close friend of Dickens, who also became interested in mesmerism. Dickens practised mesmerism on his wife Catherine, Madame de la Rue and his friend John Leech.
- 108 Ibid.
- 109 *Letters* vol.5, p.563, 3 July 1849.
- 110 *Letters* vol.12, p.327-28, 8 April 1869.
- 111 *Letters* vol.4, pp.47-8, 18 February 1844.
- 112 *Letters* vol.5, p.19, 28 January 1847.
- 113 *Letters* vol.5, pp.604-605, [late August 1849].
- 114 Ibid.
- 115 *Letters* vol.11, p.523, 26 December 1867.
- 116 *Letters* vol.12, p.67, 8 March 1868.
- 117 *Letters* vol.11, p.91, 13 September 1865.
- 118 *Letters* vol.11, p.155, 9 February 1866.
- 119 *Letters* vol.12, p.339, 21 April 1869.
- 120 *Letters* vol.12, p.342, 23 April 1869.
- 121 George Dolby, *Charles Dickens as I knew him: The Story of the Reading Tours in Great Britain and America (1866-1870)*, (Hereafter abbreviated to Dolby), London, 1887, p.443.
- 122 In the illustration which accompanies this paper the most dramatic change noted with these pulse readings occurred on 15 February 1870 when Dickens read Nancy and Sikes (The Murder). His pulse rate increased from 90 to 124, a change of 34 beats per minute. The maximum heart rate of a person depends on their age and is calculated as 220 minus your age. In Dickens's case this would have been 162. 'The ordinary state of Mr Dickens's pulse was 72'. Dolby, p.444.
- 123 John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, London, 1874, vol.3, p.494. These symptoms suggest Dickens had a bitemporal homonymous hemianopia, which is the loss of half of the field of view on the same side in both eyes. This is seen in patients with stroke and lesions of the middle cerebral artery.
- 124 Ibid.
- 125 The informant was his son Charles Dickens. A paper entitled 'Charles Dickens: a neglected diagnosis', *The Lancet*, vol.358, December 22/29, 2001, pp.2158-2161, suggests that Dickens may have had a right parietal or parieto-temporal disorder of the brain.