

BOOK REVIEW

Diseases in the District of Maine 1772-1820. The Unpublished Work of Jeremiah Barker, a Rural Physician in New England by Richard J Kahn

Hardback, 547 pages
Oxford University Press, ISBN 9780190053253
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Richard J Kahn is a retired physician and medical historian. His book, *Diseases in the District of Maine 1772-1820*, is the product of lengthy research of a 200-year-old manuscript and other documents discovered in a New England local archive. The author of these papers was Jeremiah Barker, a rural family doctor in Maine in the early years of the American Republic.

The book is in two main sections. In the first part, the author sets the scene by outlining the life of Barker, and the backwater environment in which he practised. He also sketches out the wider historical context when traditional Galenic humoral theory confronted contemporary “Enlightenment” developments in chemistry and scientific medicine. Barker’s medical education was via traditional apprenticeship and he had no formal academic links. He strove to educate himself through meticulous case recording, reading and correspondence. However, he was hampered by limited access to medical books and journals at this time. It is therefore remarkable that Barker was able to contribute to new ideas by publishing several articles in the first two medical journals in the United States.

The second section of this book includes the transcript of Barker’s unpublished manuscript containing over 100 case histories with details of management and outcome. Medical conditions covered include insanity, purulent sore throat, puerperal fever, measles, influenza, dropsy (oedema), haemorrhoids, cancers of the skin and breast and consumption (TB). Fortunately, Richard Kahn has helped to relieve the tedium of the Barker manuscript by providing detailed explanatory footnotes and a comprehensive glossary.

Barker’s management involved heroic bleeding, mercury therapy and blistering. Not surprisingly many of the patients died and, in his search for an explanation, Barker conducted autopsies. He also pioneered the use of alkaline therapies which came “in vogue” when Lavoisier disproved the phlogiston theory in the late 18C.

Diseases in the District of Maine 1772-1820 is a well-written, wide-ranging, scholarly work. It will appeal to anyone interested in the day-to-day practice of family medicine in the formative years of the United States.

Chris Derrett
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