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BOOK REVIEW

Pierre-Charles-Alexandre Louis (1787 – 1872): A French doctor at the dawn of scientific medicine (Acteurs de la Science)
by Michel Dubuisson

Paperback, 212 pages
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Anyone who visits France will know how good the French are at celebrating those who have contributed to the arts and sciences. It is therefore somewhat shocking that someone of the calibre of Pierre-Charles-Alexandre Louis has been forgotten in his own country. Dr John Ward, who wrote one of the two Forewords in this book, recently surveyed the Anglo-French Medical Society and found that none of the French members had even heard of Louis. Louis is known in the English-speaking world, and I was introduced to him at medical school in the 1970s when we were told that he dared to question the value of bloodletting, which had been practiced for centuries without any clear scientific basis.

There is an interesting paper by Walter Steiner (1870-1942) of Connecticut that discusses Louis and his influence on American students. Nineteenth-century Paris attracted foreign medical students from North America, England and elsewhere to study under Louis as well as Gabriel Andral (1797-1876) and Auguste François Chomel (1788–1858). Louis, through his ideas and writings, developed what would become evidence-based medicine, and he studied a variety of conditions including bloodletting, diphtheria and tuberculosis with detailed numerical analysis. Louis was an early advocate for quantitative methods in clinical medicine. These foreign students were to make major contributions when they returned home.

Charles James Blasius Williams (1805-1889) was an English physician and a specialist in chest diseases. Williams wrote some derogatory remarks about Louis in his memoirs stating that: 'In the same ward [in Paris], we often saw a tall solemn man with spectacles, diligently taking notes alone, not accompanying the physician. This was M. Louis, collecting materials for his elaborate work on phthisis, which established his reputation for statistics; these he held to be the only proper basis of medicine. In that line he became famous; but he was equally remarkable for the gloominess of his predictions, and the inefficiency of his practice.'

One might comment that it is easy to be overly optimistic in the absence of statistical analysis, and without effective treatments for tuberculosis, as an example, how can a physician be efficient? It is easy to believe that we are more effective than we are in reality, especially when we have an emotional attachment to favourable outcomes. It is noted that Louis own son died of tuberculosis whilst he was a medical student.

The author is a retired physician and endocrinologist and the book is unusually written in the first person as if by Louis. As a result I am unsure what is a translation of the actual words of Louis and what are the words and views of the author.

This book is warmly welcomed and will be of interest to those interested in the origins of scientific medicine and medical statistics. Certainly, further research about Louis is needed and would be a productive area, particularly on his influences on North American medicine.

Reference: Steiner, W.R., Dr. Pierre-Charles-Alexander Louis, A Distinguished Parisian Teacher Of American Medical Students. *Annals Of Medical History*, Third Series, 2, 1940, Pp 451-460.

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