CHAPTER THREE

EARLY MODERN MEDICINE
IN PRINT AND DIABETES:
PUBLISHED ADVICE AND IMAGERY

The dissemination of information through publishing transformed Britain from the early sixteenth-century onwards. Around four hundred books were printed by 1510, with production rising rapidly over the next two hundred years to 32,000 volumes.1 As it did with politics and religion, the printing press revolutionized western medicine and democratized knowledge about sickness and health, making even technical and specialized information available to the literate and to those who could listen to material read aloud. Published medical books and brochures became a popular staple in London bookshops and stalls, creating a burgeoning market for self-help health literature. Deliberately omitting herbals and almanacs from his inventory, K.F. Russell categorized medical material printed before 1600 into three distinct areas: popular health recipes issued for the general public; works on the plague; and translations of Latin staples, made more accessible to both medical professionals and the hoi polloi.2 To his select list one must add literature about the monstrous, objects of wonder and fear, typified by an anonymous broadside printed for London bookman Toby Coke entitled: The Description of a Moste Dreadfull and Mervelous Monster borne in Manchester, within the county of Lancaster upon Tusdaye being the fourteenth of August last past 1579. Besides plague, individual diseases were profiled in books on gout, sweating sickness, the stone (kidney and bladder), and French pox, venereal disease named for England’s perennial foe,

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1 James Raven, Helen Small and Naomi Tadmor, “Introduction: The Practice and Representation of Reading in England,” in The Practice and Representation of Reading in England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 5. This figure does not include “ephemeral” literature in brochures, pamphlets and almanacs.

which returned the favor by dubbing it the English disease. Elsewhere, nationalism asserted itself into the multitude of books on herbs, the popularity of which exploded in the sixteenth century when English naturalists suggested that indigenous plants might better cure local people. Timothy Bright argued “the sufficiency of English medicine for the cure of all diseases cured with medicine” in his 1580 treatise and throughout the Stuart century Englishmen muscularly asserted the priority of their experimental achievements in medical science compared with other nations. Likewise, one can discern by the mid-sixteenth century a growing number of published entries in the iatric wars that pitted university-trained physicians against their more humble counterparts in surgery, apothecary, and amateur remedy.

Although the College of Physicians in London had regulatory power, granted to it in 1518 by royal charter, its authority was limited and erratic. Moreover, its jurisdiction applied to London, leaving defense of the profession outside of its environs to individual doctors. For example, Northamptonshire physician John Cotta uncompromisingly maintained, using short case studies for proof, that only trained, qualified healers should give medical advice; he warned that patients who consulted unconventional practitioners risked being misled, injured or killed outright. Licensed doctors throughout England lamented unfet-

3 For instance, see Christopher Balista, Overthrow of the Goute, written in Latin verse, translated by Barnaby Googe (London: Abraham Veale, 1577); John Caius, A Book or Counsell against the Disease Commonly Called the Sivatoe or Sweating Sickness (London: Richard Grafton, 1552); Walter Cary, A Hammer for the Stone (London: H. Denham, 1580); Phillip Herman, An Excellent Treatise Teaching Howe to Cure the French-Pockes, put into English by J. Hester (London: J. Charlwood, 1590) and Ulrich von Hutton, De Morbo Gallico, “Englished” by T. Paynell (London: Thomas Berthelet, 1533).


5 Timothy Bright, A Treatise wherein is Declared the Sufficiency of English Medicines (London: H. Middleton, 1580); A. Rupert Hall, “English Medicine in the Royal Society’s Correspondence,” Medical History 15 (1971):123. Hall admonishes students of medical history to take this “virulence of national pride” into account when assessing scientific communication in the seventeenth century.


7 Todd Pettigrew, “‘Profitable unto the Vulgar:’ The Case and Cases of John