CHAPTER FIVE

RECONSTRUCTING DIABETIC LIFE
IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

In 1731 Lord Hervey wrote an account of his illnesses, a testimony undertaken principally to inform his children about the nature of his ailments and to recommend ways to preserve health.¹ His published memoir is unusual in the annals of “pathography,” defined by literary scholars as any narrative description of infirmity including biography, autobiography, and case histories, since it is almost exclusively a modern genre, uncommon before 1950 and rarely found before 1900.² Although some Victorian invalids committed their experiences to print, their accounts make little mention of the actual maladies that confined them to their sickrooms. Few literate sufferers in early modern England chose to divulge their battles with disease in public at all, especially with incessant ill health such as caused by diabetes, because past generations viewed sickness as private and interior, punishment for sin or the result of some unknown malevolence.³ Preserved family diaries and letters can

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provide some fragmented information about medicine from the recipients' view, but recovering that information from journals and correspondence about specific ailments like diabetes depends on some certainty that the writer actually had the disease, a nearly impossible task for the social historian. The personal experiences and point-of-view of the illiterate diabetic went unrecorded altogether. Perhaps because of this scarcity of dependable, sustained first-person resources, published or unpublished, historians until recently tended to slight patients in their assessments of early modern medicine in general, focusing instead on the lives of physicians, elite and popular, on the theoretical and jurisdictional conflicts that beset the medical marketplace, or on sudden and catastrophic epidemics. Yet chronic disease like diabetes imposed, then as now, an emotional as well as a physical toll on its victims, in addition to the economic and personal quandaries that families and society had to sort out when dealing with the deep-seated, lasting problems created by such a malady. The stories of individual diabetics in early modern

matrix, see Maria Frawley, Invalidism and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

