William Harvey 1578–1657

An outstanding scientific event of the 17th century was Harvey's description of the circulation of the blood. It was Guildo Caserio, Professor at Padua and one of Harvey's teachers, who first illustrated the Circle of Willis.

Harvey took a great interest in the function of the nervous system and combined the concepts of his predecessors. In his opinion voluntary movements were under the control of the brain, whereas involuntary movements were not. Among his observations he noted a decapitated cock continued to move in a convulsive irregular fashion. He distinguished motor from sensory nerves and observed that peripheral sensation passed to the brain. Harvey also described epilepsy and a suspected case of syringomyelia.

He was the first British writer to make a substantial contribution to midwifery. In his book on Generation a chapter entitled De Partu is devoted to obstetrics. He considered the fetus assisted its own delivery by active movement comparable to a chicken emerging from an egg or a butterfly from a chrysalis. False pregnancies are also mentioned. In one case he describes how he was unable to dissuade a woman from her fixed idea that she was pregnant, "... and all the arguments I could suggest could not remove that persuasion from her: till at the last, all her hopes vanished into flatulence and fatness and the child was born alive by the hole of the abdomen."

In 1978 Russia issued a postage stamp commemorating the 400th anniversary of the birth of William Harvey.

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