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Neurological stamp

John Coakley Lettsom (1744-1815)

Lettsom, an 18th century Quaker, physician and philanthropist, was one of the central medical figures of the period. His mother, Mary Coakley, bore seven sets of twins. The seventh and last pair were John Coakley Lettsom and his brother Edward—they were the only set of twins to survive.

Lettsom was a phenomenally successful practitioner. It is said that on his long rounds he wore out three pairs of horses each day. In London, he inaugurated a system of dispensaries which enabled poor people to be treated as outpatients. The system was then adopted by many towns throughout the country.

At the age of 28 Lettsom founded the Medical Society of London and in 1786 he described alcoholic polyneuritis to the Society. As well as the symptoms of neuritis he noted the mental symptoms associated with alcoholism. Lettsom knew nothing of the pathological process of the disease and it is not even clear whether he sensed its location. In spite of the fact that he did not use the term neuritis, he clearly recognised the disorder and its association with the "indulgence of drinking".

During his lifetime a considerable number of verses were written around Lettsom. The most famous lines are those embodying his supposed inclination for bleeding all his patients. "When any sick to me apply, I physics, bleeds and sweats 'em; If after that they choose to die, What's that to me, I. Lettsom".

He was honoured by his country of birth, the British Virgin Islands, in 1973 (Stanley Gibbons 284, Scott 249).

L F HAAS

