

# Life's Frenzies, Fluxes and Fevers

**Long before there had been clinical thermometers there were** humans burdened with fever expressing itself as copious sweat upon a burning forehead. But not all fevers were the same: there were fevers that did not abate but seemed to consume the body; there were fevers of the brain causing frenzied delirium; and fevers thought to be so deeply seated that they must be infiltrating the bones; and fever so profound that no febrifuge could offer relief. Truly, in the words of Thomas Sydenham (1624-1689), fever is Nature's way of expressing its terrible distemper. And if the body ever needed to publish an autobiography of its dysfunctions surely it would express itself through a fever'd brow and a temperature chart.

There are few terms in English so expressive of deep feelings as the word, fever, and yet so ambiguous that it can be employed as a metaphor for the entire spectrum of human passions. The word, fever, has been used liberally—one might say, feverishly—by physicians, by Victorian poets and by those enthralled by life's many temptations and compulsions.

Physicians had been ill-equipped to understand those ailments accompanied by the sundry fluxes, fevers and frenzies that assail human life; and so they gave scholarly names to those vexing ailments associated with heated human bodies. And thus there was spotted fever, gaol fever, puerperal (childbirth) fever, ship fever, tertian fever, quotidian fever, quartian fever, river fever, swamp fever, sweating fever, yellow fever, blackwater fever and a thousand separate fevers bearing geographic names such as Crimean fever or Mediterranean fever. Physicians further divided fevers into those accompanied by skin changes; and thus there were poxes, exanthems, macular rashes, papular rashes and even confluent rashes. Yet with all of the proliferation of names, there was not a single systemic fever that had responded to any medical intervention other than common sense measures such as bed rest and fluids by mouth. Sixteenth Century physicians, confronted with a variety of fevers, viewed them as a Martian might struggle to understand a major league baseball game, assuming that the outer numbers on the uniforms would somehow provide an adequate explanation.

Both philosophers and physicians agreed that fever was a puzzle; but the philosophers went further by announcing that fever was merely the primal substance of life announcing itself to the observer. After all, they declared, when life departs, does not the body warmth also depart? Some fever, then, was deemed a necessary, normal, component of that divine intervention, that fragile spark called life. And so it was concluded that an excessive fever was but an overt human response to the Creator's touch; and if it was feverishly exuberant, it then represented a visceral conflict between combating cosmic forces played out in the amphitheater of the human body. To suppress or abort fever, then,

represented an ill use of man's meager resources. It remained for a small minority of skeptical physicians to consider fever, alternatively, as an unrequited intrusion of the human substance by an unwanted invader. Some sought remedies to lower the fever while others, nihilists in spirit, believed that with time fevers will eventually burn away. William Osler (1849 – 1919) stated: "Humanity has three great enemies: fever, famine and war; and of these by far the greatest, by far the most terrible, is fever."

Poets thought that fevers were the body acknowledging the presence of anguish and dismay. Keats (1795 – 1821) wrote

Fade far away, dissolve and quite forget  
What thou among the leaves hast never known,  
The weariness, the fever and the fret  
Here where men sit and hear each other groan:  
Where palsy shakes a few sad, last gray hairs,  
Where youth grows pale and specter-thin and dies.

And Dylan Thomas (1914-1953), in a different century, carrying the metaphor of fever far beyond the precincts of medicine or customary passions, thought of the bloody, feverish consequences when bloodless statesmen signed great treaties:

The hand that signed the treaty bred a fever,  
And famine grew and locusts came;  
Great is the hand that holds dominion over  
Man by a scribbled name.

Dylan Thomas' fevers were of the nonpyretic type with the burning confined to the inner soul. Such a fever had a companionship with the gamblers' fever and the other negative but febrile compulsions of life.

Macbeth called life but a fitful fever. W.H.Auden (1907-1973) agreed declaring that "not to be born is the best for man", but Boris Pasternak (1890-1960) who knew something of wintry fevers in the gulag, advised otherwise: "To live life to the end is not a childish task."

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## Disclosure of Financial Interests

Stanley M. Aronson, MD, and spouse/significant other have no financial interests to disclose.

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