The oldest sick note

A 450-year-old letter written by Mary Queen of Scots excusing a nobleman from his duties was sold at auction earlier this year for £6000 [1]. Dated 14 March 1554 it has been described as the world’s oldest sick note and was sent by Mary to the Laird of Blair, relieving him of his duties at court as he was suffering from gout. Gout, traditionally an affliction of the rich, was even worn as a badge of honour rather than the more common rheumatism. Many famous individuals have suffered from gout including Martin Luther, Sir Isaac Newton and Thomas Jefferson. But in the bicentennial year of his birth, England’s greatest fictional author not only suffered with the condition but featured it repeatedly in his writing. Sam Weller, in the Pickwick Papers, cautions his father against excessive drinking fearing it will bring the old man and another attack. In Bleak House, Sir Leicester Dedlock is resigned to his fate as a sufferer of the family gout, passed down through the generations. He describes it as his ‘old faithful ally’ which ‘grips him by both legs’. The suffering of these characters preceded the onset of Dickens’s own gout in his left foot at the age of 52. It plagued him in the last years of his life, had a deleterious effect on his lifestyle [2] and may have been partially responsible for the significant reduction in his literary output during this time. The associated metabolic syndrome probably contributed to his death six years later from a stroke. Dickens was a famous reformer and campaigned for the improvement of social conditions. He had experience of working in a blacking factory, putting soot into pots and drew on this experience for his writing. He visited the mills in Manchester to see and report on the working conditions there.

Gout is the most common form of inflammatory arthritis in men over the age of 40 with an estimated prevalence in the UK of 1.4% [3]. Over 60% of sufferers have metabolic syndrome and have a higher risk of death mainly because of vascular disease. The incidence and prevalence of gout has markedly increased over the last few decades and its association with alcohol, dietary purines and fructose ingestion has been confirmed and explains why it was formerly seen as a disease of the affluent. New treatments have been developed including interleukin-1 antagonists for acute gout and febuxostat and pegloticase for chronic gout. Vitamin C supplements reduce the risk of gout.

‘A sovereign cure for the gout’ said Mr Pickwick hastily producing his notebook ‘What is it?’ ‘The gout sir,’ replied Mr Weller ‘the gout is a complaint as arises from too much ease and comfort. If ever you’re attacked with the gout, sir, jist you marry a widder as has got a good loud woice, with a decent notion of usin’ it, and you’ll never have the gout agin.... I can warrant it to drive away any illness as is caused by too much jollity.’ [4].

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References