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## NOTABLE NOTES

### Syphilis, a Disfiguring Disease

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After reeling from the Black Plague in the early 15th century, the medical community was faced with another epidemic. This one likely traveled with Christopher Columbus and his crew across the seas from the Americas to Europe. There was no consensus for the name of the disease. Countries each referred to the disease as originating from a neighboring country, reflecting the political rivalries at the time. For example, the French disease, the Neapolitan disease, the Polish disease, the German disease, and the Spanish disease all referred to the same unfamiliar malady.<sup>1,2</sup> The disease adopted its more infamous name in 1530 from Girolamo Fracastoro's poem in which the god Apollo curses the people with a monstrous ailment called syphilis to punish a shepherd named Syphilis for worshipping a king.<sup>2</sup>

Syphilis was met with fear and stigmatizing disgust as it spread quickly and with a fatality much greater than the syphilis of today. The illness disfigured bodies with eruptions of pustules, ulcerated chancres and facial destruction. Syphilis was so terrifying that even physicians initially refused to treat patients with this disease. Governing authorities were as concerned about containing infection as they were about keeping the afflicted out of sight.<sup>3</sup> By the late 18th century, syphilis' symptoms, ability to infect internal organs, and congenital and non-sexual modes of transmission were well documented and distinguished from other venereal causes. However, it was not until 1905 that the etiologic origin was identified as *Spirochaeta pallida*.<sup>1</sup>

While the rich could hide in their homes and receive treatment from the best physicians, the poor were left searching for a cure from anyone else—midwives, spice merchants, unlicensed practitioners, apothecaries, or barber-surgeons. Viewed largely as a cutaneous affliction, many of the earlier cases were treated by barber-surgeons. Popular treatments utilized mercury and guaiac "holy" wood. Mercury was

thought to remedy skin disorders and was often administered topically, though it was given via fumigation in some instances. Guaiac wood imported from the Indies was thought to cure syphilis by purging the body.<sup>3</sup> When fever was noted to improve the symptoms of later disease stages, such as neurosyphilis, treatments began to include various pyrogenic methods. One notable procedure developed in the early 1900s required infecting syphilitic patients with malaria to induce fever paroxysms and subsequently treating the malaria with quinine. However, no treatment was as effective as the introduction of penicillin in the mid-1900s by Alexander Fleming.<sup>2</sup>

Despite being a tremendously horrifying and novel disease when it first appeared in Europe, syphilis was greeted by a force of physicians who rationalized the disease using the existing tools and explanatory framework of their time. Their findings paved the way for the discovery of penicillin, which is still widely used to treat syphilis today.

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