INTRODUCTION OF THE VARIOLATION 'A LA TURCA' TO THE WEST BY LADY MARY MONTAGU

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INTRODUCTION

Smallpox was a fatal contagious disease and caused many epidemics all over the world with lots of casualties for ages all throughout the history. While trying to find ways to prevent from this calamity on one hand, mankind has produced, on the other hand, several methods known as variolation, vaccination against the disease. Variolation has been the oldest method of immunization ever known in medical history.

The method of variolation was widely used in the East by various traditional cultures for many centuries. For instance it was accurately observed in India, China, Circasia that men were rarely re-attacked by smallpox, and the second attack was easily avoided without any severe and permanent lesions (2), (12), (10), (5).

VARIOLATION FOR SMALLPOX AND TURKS

Before the foundation of the Turkish Republic (1923), Turkey witnessed many epidemics of smallpox devastating the country during the Ottoman Empire (1299-1923). Therefore variolation method was very valuable for Turks who had presumably adopted the method via Seljuks that had brought the technique to Anatolia from Eastern regions and had been practising it ceremoniously every year. The variolation method that protected men against the disease and alleviated its grave affects was completely unknown to the West until the 18th century. The first publication (1713) ever made at that period was a paper by Dr. Emanuel Timonius (1669-1720) in Latin (15) relating that the variolation method was applied by Turks and became popular in Istanbul through the method used in old Asian societies and transferred to Turkey by Caucasia. Nevertheless, Timonius’ paper could not become effective to make public the method in Europe (11), (13), (15), (1). Variolation was made popular in the West through the method applied in Turkey only by Lady Mary Worthley Montagu in 1717 (4).

LADY MARY WORTLEY MONTAGU (1689-1762):

Lady Montagu was the wife of the British Ambassador appointed to the Capital of the Ottoman Empire in 1716 (6), (9). Her letters to friends comprising her impressions during her stay in Edirne (Adrianople) and in Istanbul were published in 1761 and since that date they were republished many times and translated in many languages (8), (7).

Smallpox was an extremely important contagious disease in England at that period as it was in other European countries. Lady Montagu was shocked by the loss of her own brother due to smallpox just after his marriage in 1713. She, too, caught smallpox in 1715. She recovered though, but with the scars on her face remained forever and she also lost her eyelashes (9). French Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, Marquis Jean-Louis de Bonac emphasises those scars by expressing his admiration of her as: "I was very influenced by her wounded beauty and by her good command of Latin" (3). It was not by coincidence of her interest in the practise of
variolation in the Ottoman Empire. Lady Montagu believed the effect of this operation she observed in Edirne and in Istanbul. A letter among all others played an important role on the introduction and popularisation of smallpox variolation à la Turc triggering the wide use of it in England and in European countries. Lady Montagu wrote that letter from Edirne on April 1st, 1717 to Sarah Chiswell, her friend in England. She related how it was done by old experienced women by inoculation of the attenuated pustule material kept in nutshells through a skin scratch into human vein (8). She not only introduced this technique to Europe, but she also worked hard for making it public in Europe. Furthermore she made her baby son inoculated by traditional variolation technique in their summer house in Istanbul on March 18th, 1718 just before her return to England (3).

APPLICATION OF VARIOLATION À LA TURCA IN THE WEST

Lady Montagu had her four year old daughter variolated by his doctor Maitland during the great smallpox epidemic in London in 1721. But first she had to make sure that the operation was harmless. Therefore she made six convicted murderers and eleven orphans variolated before her daughter's operation. When it turned out to be harmless, she let her daughter inoculated (14). This event exemplified positively for the variolation of 200 upper class people in England. 897 more inoculations were done until 1729, and only 17 of those cases were lost. But Lady Montagu was also criticised because of her actions and was blamed for behaving in ill-advised manner in a civilized country with an old parliamentary tradition (9).

DISCUSSION

The variolation method applied in Turkey during the 18th century was not a technique discovered by Turks. As a matter of fact it was a very old traditional practise known in several regions in the world, especially in the Eastern cultures for centuries. The most important point of this age old story is the fact that variolation was learned from the Ottomans and transferred to the West by means of Lady Montagu; and Ottoman Empire-Turkey bridged the way to the employment of this technique, which perhaps led the way to and inspired Edward Jenner (1749-1823) years later who discovered smallpox vaccination. Jenner might have eventually evaluated the sagacity of centuries and developed his own modern, scientific method in 1789, leading the way to the eradication of this catastrophe from the earth. And this has been a giant step in the history of contagious diseases.

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