

DR. ELISHA NORTH, OF NEW LONDON,
CONNECTICUT, THE FOUNDER OF THE FIRST
EYE INFIRMARY IN THE UNITED STATES*

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The writer of Ecclesiasticus, in referring to those who had died, stated: "Some there be that have no memorial, yet there are others of them that have left a name behind them that their praises might be reported." In this second group we may readily find the name of Elisha North, although, in many respects, his record is most fragmentary. Elisha North was born in Goshen, Connecticut, on January 8, 1771. In this town, which is situated in the midst of the Litchfield hills, he acquired a ruggedness of health which was of great assistance to him in his future career of country doctor. He attended school for only a short time, and at an early age he studied medicine with his father, who was both a farmer and a doctor. At the age of sixteen Elisha North is said to have skilfully set and cared for a broken leg. The need of further training for his life-work led him to go to Hartford to study under the then famous Dr. Lemuel Hopkins, who conducted a small medical school there. How long Dr. North remained in Hartford is uncertain, but we know that he returned to Goshen to practise and to earn by his practice a sufficient sum to enroll as a student at the University of Pennsylvania, where he studied for two years. The spring before his sojourn at Philadelphia, however, he had been elected to membership in the Connecticut Medical Society, which was organized in 1792. Two years after his return to Goshen he married Hannah Beach, the daughter

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of Frederick Beach, of Goshen, and his work as a physician appeared to center in the town of his birth.

In the spring of 1800 vaccination was introduced into this country by Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse, of Boston, and by Dr. James Smith, of Baltimore, who were firmly convinced of the great importance of this measure. North had probably read Jenner's "An Inquiry into the Causes and Effects of Variolae Vaccinae." He at a later period certainly owned a



Copy of a Miniature of Dr. Elisha North.

copy of Coxe's "Practical Observations on Vaccination or Inoculation for the Small Pox." Early realizing its importance, North made a trip to New Haven—a distance of nearly 50 miles—to obtain "some vaccine fluid warm and fresh from a patient there" who had been vaccinated by Dr. Waterhouse six or seven days before. With this vaccine he vaccinated three individuals,—two children and an adult,—the first two cases being successful. It was generally believed, North stated, that "the physicians had merely to

obtain the virus, use it on a few persons, then put them to the test of variolous inoculation and afterwards to propagate the kine-pox at pleasure." The following incident soon showed the fallacy of this conclusion. Dr. Jesse Carrington, of Goshen, whom North called "my rival in business," procured some virus from a person, styled a "kine-pox peddler," with which he vaccinated his own wife and others. Later, when he supposed his wife had recovered from kine-pox, he induced her to permit variolous infection to be injected into her arm. "Unfortunately," North added, "thus the believing wife, wishing to convince an incredulous public of the utility of the new practice, fell a victim to smallpox and was obliged by law to be taken to the smallpox hospital."

In May, 1801, North had a patient come to him with cowpox, the sore, or cowpox pustule, being on his hand. This was evidently the first case of vaccine disease seen in this country, and with the virus of this patient North vaccinated successfully a little girl, and subsequently vaccinated a man named Hunt with the virus obtained from the arm of this girl. Later, Hunt went to New York, and thus the first genuine case of cowpox in New York originated from this American source. Despite North's efforts, opposition to this procedure developed in Goshen until five of his vaccinated patients visited the smallpox Hospital at Winchester, where they were inoculated with warm variolous infection. The experiment was successful and the community was satisfied, but after "we had succeeded with much labor and expense in establishing the utility of vaccination, too many thought," he stated, that "they could vaccinate themselves, having learned how from us," so that their teachers were defrauded of the "pitiful fees" that they would otherwise have secured. North's labors, however, were appreciated by some of his fellow townsmen, for on February 6, 1811, an advertisement appeared in the *Connecticut Courant*, in which four selectmen of Goshen spoke flatteringly of his labors ten years pre-

viously to prove the efficacy of vaccination. This advertisement was repeated on June 6, 1815, when North had removed to New London, where, he stated, he was ready to vaccinate by his method. In 1826 Dr. Brainard, of New London, secured smallpox vaccine from Baltimore and apparently was reaping large pecuniary rewards from its use. At that time North wrote to S. Green, the editor of the *New London Gazette*, to say that he likewise had "Kine Pock matter from Boston which is far superior to that from Baltimore, and that he is also willing to vaccinate."

In 1807 a new and dreadful disease, epidemic cerebrospinal meningitis, claimed North's attention. This disease baffled many physicians who tried to cope with it. Two forms of treatment were employed. The Federalistic physicians believed in depleting the system by calomel and venesections, whereas the Democratic physicians pinned their faith onto the use of so-called stimulating remedies. Extreme methods of treatment were used by both parties. For example, among the stimulators, or Democratic physicians, Dr. Bestor, of Simsbury, gave one patient two quarts of brandy and one quart of wine within twenty-four hours; Dr. Elijah Lyman, of Torrington, and subsequently of Farmington, within seven hours gave five drams of the essence of peppermint, one-half dram of gum-camphor, two ounces of brandy, and one and one-half pints of wine; Dr. Samuel Woodward, of Torrington, gave wine and ardent spirits to produce a degree of intoxication, noting that these stimulants never appeared to do any injury; Drs. Haskell, Spooner, and Holmes, of Petersham, Massachusetts, within twelve hours gave to one patient, aged twenty years, one quart of brandy; this in addition to external stimulants; and Dr. Nathan Strong, of Hartford, within eight hours gave one quart of brandy. It is not surprising then that North wrote "it is not to be denied that the use of stimulants has been abused in the treatment of our epidemic," and this statement came from one who himself was a "stimulator" in this disease. However, he declares

that he did not mean that "in every case patients must take brandy by quarts or wine by gallons, for I believe that it requires as much judgment in using stimulants as it does in reducing the system." During 1808 North treated 65 patients with epidemic cerebrospinal meningitis and lost only one case, whereas of six others in Goshen who died of it, four were under the care of other physicians. Elsewhere he wrote: "I have myself treated more than 200 patients with this disease; of these I have lost two."

Five years after the outbreak of this disease North wrote the first book to be published anywhere upon this subject; in this he gave his own views concerning the disease and those of other prominent physicians. Thirty years later he planned a second and enlarged edition. From his manuscript Dr. Pleadwell in an article concludes that it would have been no improvement upon the first edition. In fact, written when North was about seventy years old, it showed the effect of age upon a previously logical mind. In the manuscript of the second edition he concludes that cholera and spotted fever are types of a new disease complex which he proposed to call malignant, or congestive, asthenia.

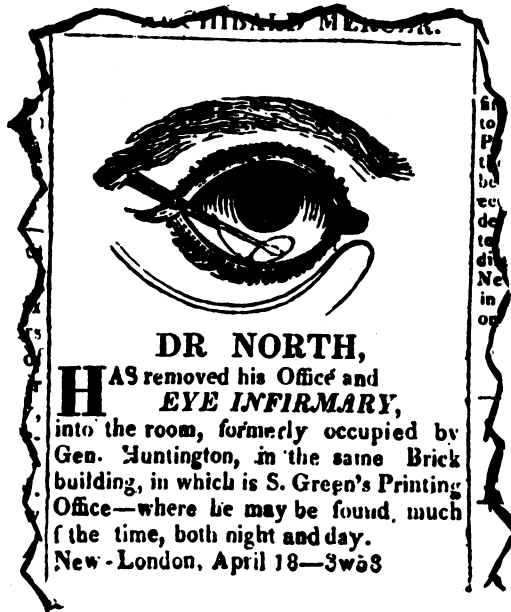
Before North established his eye infirmary we learn, from an advertisement in the Connecticut *Gazette* just after his removal to New London, that he was located at Major Ripley's and would, "with promptness and pleasure, attend to all such calls in the line of his profession as he may receive." Two years later an interesting advertisement appeared in the same newspaper, which stated: "Information is hereby given that the operation for a cataract is performed; and the diseases of the eye attended to; also a new method of treating the polypus in the nose and also a method peculiar to himself of treating the hydrochs articuli, or collection of fluid in the joints, is practised by Elisha North." In a note which follows this statement we find that Dr. North had removed to the house lately occupied by Capt. John Clark, Jr., a short distance south of the Presbyterian Church.

This, then, may have been the first location of the eye infirmary which was started three years later.

In the spring of 1817 Dr. North opened his eye infirmary in New London, "thinking that he might multiply in this way the number of these cases coming to him and thereby increase his knowledge by advertising the public in regard to an eye institution." In his "Outlines of the Science of Life," published in 1829, he claimed to have succeeded, "although not to our wishes in a pecuniary view of the case." His success, he believed, "probably hastened in this country the establishment of larger and better eye infirmaries." I have endeavored to ascertain how he obtained his skill in this specialty, but my efforts have been unsuccessful. Before he opened his eye infirmary he acknowledged that he attended to eye patients, and his first interest in this specialty may have been aroused during his student days at the University of Pennsylvania. Who was responsible for the selection is a mystery. Philip Syng Physick, the father of American surgery, returned to this country in 1792, the year before North entered the University of Pennsylvania, and we have records of Physick's skill in this specialty. However, he did little practice during his first three years, and he held no chair at the Medical School until 1805, so that North's meeting with Physick must have been casual, if at all. In 1794, however, Physick was appointed surgeon to the Pennsylvania Hospital, and it is possible that North saw him operate there. Dr. Francis R. Packard writes me that Physick's first recorded operation was for cataract.

I have also been somewhat unsuccessful in ascertaining the location of the eye infirmary. It may have been in a house on State Street, opposite the Union Bank, where North lived for a time, but the property was advertised for rent on January 4, 1819. Subsequently this advertisement was repeated ten times in the *Connecticut Gazette*. The house was described as large, pleasant, and convenient for a man of business. We learn, however, that on April 19,

1826, the infirmary was definitely located in a room of the brick building which housed S. Green's Printing Office, where the advertisement stated North would be found much of the time, both by night and by day. In the interval between his probable first and this definite location the infirmary may have been in the Otis House on Golden Hill, where North lived. On April 11, 1827, the definite location



Advertisement of Dr. North's Eye Infirmary in the New London Gazette, April 13, 1826.

of the infirmary appears to have been for rent, and a house that was advertised for rent by Edward Hallam, and said to have been resided in by North, may have been its next location, but where the house was located is unknown. Another interval is then seen to elapse, and the next location of the infirmary, if it was maintained after 1835, must have been in North's house at 119 Huntington Street, which he purchased in that year.

On August 17, 1817, a few months after the infirmary was established, the following article appeared in the *Connecticut Gazette*, under the heading "Infirmary for Curing Diseases of the Eye." "It affords us great pleasure to remark the growing interest which the Infirmary established in this city by Dr. North excites abroad. From the assiduous attention which the Doctor has paid to this part of his profession, and the remarkable success which his operations have had in restoring the blind to sight, by his improved mode, we are so confident of his ability to render ample justice to his patients that we think it a duty we owe to humanity to recommend to those who are laboring under diseases of the eyes, and reside at a distance from any surgical oculist, to avail themselves of the skill of the Doctor." In an advertisement in the same newspaper two years later North wrote: "It may not be unuseful to state that in the management of diseases of the Eye, I have had the pleasure to prevent total blindness, and restore sight to 12 or 13 persons, during the last three years. These would now probably be moping about in total darkness, and be a burden to society and to themselves, had it not been for my individual exertions."

The renown of North's eye infirmary must have aroused jealousy in the minds of the directors of the New York Eye Infirmary, which was organized in 1820, for on May 28, 1823, they advertised in the *New London Gazette* as follows:

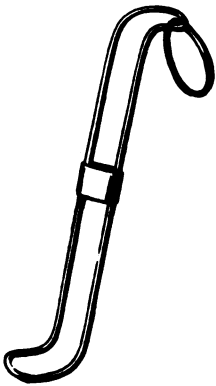
NEW YORK
EYE INFIRMARY

The Directors of the New York Eye Infirmary give notice, that after the first of June next, indigent persons, afflicted with deafness, or other diseases of the EAR, will be received and prescribed for at the Infirmary, No. 1 Murray Street, on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, from 12 to 1 o'clock.

William Few, President.

New York, May 24.

In 1829 North published his book, "Outlines of the Science of Life," in which, on page 88, he described the opening, in the spring of 1817, without any adventitious aid, of his eye infirmary, and on the title page of that book we find the following statement: "Elisha North, M.D., of the Connecticut Medical Society, Honorary Member of two other Medical Associations, Conductor of an Eye Infirmary, Author of a Treatise on Spotted Fever, etc." Opposite the title page of this book are illustrations of the various organs of the body



Dr. North's Eye
Speculum.

and of three instruments of his own invention; viz., a trephine, a trocar, and an eye speculum. Of these, the last-named instrument alone interests us. He exhibited this, along with his trephine, before the meeting of the Connecticut Medical Society held at Hartford on May 9, 1821.

The speculum had been used by North for several years before he published this description of it, and he found that it "conveniently aided the fingers in effecting the object for which it was conveniently designed. The ring is put in suitable contact with the eye, and by resting or placing the fore and middle fingers upon the wings of the instrument, one is enabled to steady both the eye and the eyelids. The pressure on the eye, when the instrument is made to touch the membranes, should be a little increased, and so kept until its muscles become somewhat fatigued, when such pressure may be diminished. The ring touching so many points makes very little force needed—not enough to occasion permanent irritation. A great mechanical advantage is obtained when every movement necessary to delicate operations can be directed by one, instead of two, minds. The fingers should also be nigh the site of such operations.

For this last reason, and likewise to insure steadiness and precision, eye-scissors should have a spring, *properly placed*, of suitable elasticity to open their blades."

The only anecdote concerning a patient in North's eye infirmary is told by his grandson in an account of his grandfather. The patient entered the infirmary with an inflamed eye, which, on careful examination by North, was found to be the seat of a foreign body. North successfully removed the foreign body and prescribed a soothing lotion. Before dismissing the patient North asked, "What have you been doing for your eye?" The man replied that he had been to see Dr. Blank. "Ah," said Dr. North, "and what did he do for you?" "He gave me 13 doses of calomel," was the begrudging reply.

Dr. North did not join the Litchfield County Medical Society until 1811, but during his life in New London he took an active part in that medical society, serving as Clerk in 1815 and as Chairman in 1823 and in 1831. He was also active in the work of the State Medical Society, which, in 1813, conferred upon him the degree of M.D. He was a frequent delegate to its annual meetings, and he served on its committees.

In 1824, probably desiring to gain added rest and recreation, he removed to a farm at East Lyme, each day driving in to see his patients in New London. It was while he was living on this farm that he found some peat, which he believed to be extremely useful as fuel. In an article in the *American Journal of Science* he exploited his belief. After a few years he returned to New London, where he lived until his death on December 29, 1843, aged seventy-three years. His family consisted of a wife and eight children—four daughters and four sons. One of the sons was named Harvey; one, Erasmus Darwin; and one, William Heberdin, showing in this way the father's love and reverence for some of the illustrious names in his profession. His second

daughter, Eliza, and his son, Erasmus Darwin, taught at an academy for girls in New London, at least during 1828. Later his son graduated in medicine, but does not appear to have practised his profession, since, under the nickname of "Lord North," he instructed Yale students in the art of elocution from 1830 to 1854. Elisha North's sons, William Heberdin and James Edward, were in business in New Orleans. The latter lost his life in the shipwreck of the steamer Arctic off the coast of Newfoundland. He could have saved himself but refused to leave the vessel so long as women and children remained on board.

North's quaint, dry humor is apparent in a few existing anecdotes, and is well illustrated in his writings. Some of the stories, still extant, record his absentmindedness. It will suffice to quote a few examples:

On one occasion, one of his children, when quite young, swallowed a pin and in great distress ran to her father, exclaiming: "I've swallowed a pin." Dr. North, barely looking up from his book, quietly said: "Well, does it hurt you?" "No, Father," said the child. "Then don't be careless again," was the laconic reply.

As are many others in his profession, he was not a good bill collector. After his death the following entry was found in his ledger:

"Mr. Blank, to doctoring you till you died, \$17.50."

At another time, when his house caught fire, a neighbor called out to him: "Doctor, your house is on fire." He is said to have made no reply but to have walked quietly into his house. Seeing him so cool, a bystander asked his neighbor and intimate friend, Judge Lyman, "What do you suppose the Doctor is going to do?" "Doubtless," answered the Judge, "he will consult Count Rumford's works to ascertain the best means for extinguishing fire."

Dr. North's thoughts were prolific, discursive, and philosophic. His increasing deafness led him later in life to

write many of his reflections on slips of paper, which he kept carefully in his pocket-book. When this was full he would empty the slips into a desk drawer, and later they would be consigned to a large sugar barrel which was conveniently placed in one corner of his office. At the time of his death there were either five or seven barrelsful of these notations. His great granddaughter informs me that her father, the late Dr. J. J. Summerell, of Salisbury, North Carolina, visited Dr. North's home before the Civil War and was allowed to read these slips of paper. Unfortunately, when he was questioned by his daughter as to their contents, he could only remember that they were opinions on medical and general topics and appeared to him to be very sensible at that time.

In his practice Dr. North is said to have "exhibited a remarkable degree of caution, deliberation, and careful reflection. When concerned with the health and comfort, and we may add the moral welfare, of his patients or friends, he exercised a conscientious care and thoughtfulness that preserved him from unsafe enthusiasm or dangerous and extreme views. As a counselling physician, he enjoyed the confidence and friendship of his brethren, and was much valued for his philosophic habits of mind in cases of difficulty and uncertainty."—*People's Advocate and New London County Republican*, Jan. 4, 1844.

In his bibliography of North's published writings, Dr. Bolton lists 12 of them. I have been able to add four more. The titles of his books were: (1) "Spotted Fever," published in 1811. (2) "Outlines of the Science of Life," published in 1829. This volume contained six essays, which had previously been printed. The chapter on the history of vaccination in Goshen has already been mentioned. (3) "Uncle Tobey's Pilgrims' Progress of Phrenology," published in 1836. This book sought to give instruction in phrenology in the form of a pleasant conversation in a mixed company of gentlemen and ladies. Among his published papers we may mention one on his operation for

lithotomy by the posterior method, with the patient placed upon his abdomen; and when we remember that in those days there were no anesthetics, the position would appear to have been a judicious one, for the patient had the power of closely embracing a solid substance (the operating table) and could be secured firmly upon it, if necessary. Another paper is of interest since it describes in detail an epidemic of typhoid fever which occurred in Goshen during 1807. In this paper we find that North was opposed to the use of stimulants in the early stages of this disease. Still another of his publications has an even more absorbing interest for us, since it refers to Beaumont and his patient, Alexis St. Martin. North had made some observations concerning two drams of gastric juice removed from St. Martin's stomach by Dr. Beaumont and presented to Dr. North in New London in 1834. From these observations he concluded that it was more physiologic to regard the gastric secretion as a vital rather than as a chemical menstruum. He had seen it frozen and thawed, having kept it for six years, but found that it was still as clear, sweet, and fresh as when the specimen was first received. It did not freeze so readily as water, as it froze at 10 or 12 degrees below the freezing point of water.

Dr. North was a pioneer: (1) In founding the first eye infirmary in the United States; (2) in early establishing the efficacy of vaccination; (3) in writing the first book describing epidemic cerebrospinal meningitis; (4) in the study of digestion from the stimulus of Beaumont's book upon the subject which appeared in 1833, and (5) in his study of phrenology. This last was aroused probably by his having heard Spurzheim lecture upon this subject in New Haven in 1832. Dr. North paved the way for the establishment of many future eye infirmaries in the United States and for the further study of the aforementioned subjects, in which he was a pioneer. It is for the first of these efforts that we honor him tonight.