

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06893-2 - A Practical Essay on the History and Treatment of Beriberi:  
With Observations on Some Forms of Rheumatism Prevailing in India

J. G. Malcolmson

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### A Practical Essay on the History and Treatment of Beriberi

Reissued here together are two medical works, both published in 1835, by John Grant Malcolmson (1803–44), a British surgeon based in India. His extended essays explore the symptoms, diagnosis and treatment of beriberi and rheumatism, conditions which were widespread in Asia at the time. Also describing the contrasting effects that the illnesses had on India's native population and on European colonials, Malcolmson draws on his first-hand experience to speculate on the underlying causes. His analysis of beriberi, forming the larger of the two components here, discusses a disease which had perplexed doctors in the early nineteenth century. Beginning with numbness and spasms in the legs, and eventually rendering the patient completely bedridden, beriberi was frequently fatal, and physicians frequently confused it with other rheumatic disorders. It is now known to be caused by a deficiency of thiamine (vitamin B<sub>1</sub>).

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[More information](#)

A  
PRACTICAL ESSAY  
ON THE  
HISTORY AND TREATMENT  
OF  
BERIBERI.

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BY ASSISTANT SURGEON JOHN GRANT MALCOLMSON,  
MADRAS MEDICAL ESTABLISHMENT.

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“ The same disease yields diversity of symptoms; which howsoever they be diverse, intricate and hard to be confined, I will adventure yet, in such a vast confusion and generality to bring them into some order.” *Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy.*

“ The use of remedies one does not know is very warily to be done, and can have no other reasonable foundation, but the truth, memory and judgment of him that vouches the experience of it.” *Locke.*

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M A D R A S:  
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1835.

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[More information](#)

FORT ST. GEORGE GAZETTE, No. 38, dated 12th May,

1832, Saturday.

“ADVERTISEMENT.”

“MEDICAL PRIZE ESSAYS.”

“With a view to aid the advancement of medical science, and to communicate useful medical knowledge, the Medical Board, under the sanction of Government, announce to the medical officers under this Presidency, whether of his Majesty’s or the Honorable Company’s service, that a prize of Rupees 500, or a gold medal of that value with a suitable inscription, will be awarded, in the course of the year 1833, to the best dissertation on each of the two following subjects:

1st. On the disease called “Beriberi.”

2d. On Rheumatism, and the neuralgic affection, occasionally a sequela of it, which is termed among natives “Burning in the feet.”

Every essay, on each of these subjects, is to comprise a full and accurate history of the disease, as it affects Europeans and Natives, its varieties, and terminations; the diagnosis; an account of the morbid appearances observed on examination after death; an enquiry into the predisposing, exciting, and proximate causes; the prognosis; and the most successful mode of treatment.

Beriberi being known to be endemic in certain parts of this country, and having hitherto been but imperfectly discussed by European authors, the practice of the more intelligent native doctors deserves to be deliberately investigated: and two native remedies, in particular, which have been frequently prescribed with advantage in this disease, and are known in the northern division, by the names “Treeak Farook” and “Oleum Nigrum,” should be made the subject of examination and report. The same observation, as to the expediency of inquiring into the treatment adopted by native practitioners, is equally applicable to “Burning in the feet.”

The dissertations are to be transmitted to the Secretary of the Medical Board, on or before the 1st of May, 1833; and the adjudication of the prizes will take place in the month of July following.

To each dissertation must be prefixed a motto, which must likewise be written on the outside of a sealed packet, containing the name and address of the author. No dissertation

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[More information](#)

## ii

will be received with the author's name affixed; and all dissertations, except the successful one, will be returned, if desired. Such as may not be desired to be returned will be retained in the Medical Board office, and published, should that be considered expedient.

Although only one dissertation on each subject can be successful, others may possess great, and indeed nearly equal, merit: and the Medical Board will have much satisfaction in bringing the names of the authors of such dissertations to the favourable notice of the Right Honorable the Governor in Council.

FORT ST. GEORGE, <i>Medical Board Office,</i> } <i>3d May, 1832.</i>	By order, (Signed) H. S. FLEMING, <i>Secretary Medical Board."</i>
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FORT ST. GEORGE GAZETTE, No. 187, dated 25th September 1833, Wednesday.

No. 155.

“To

The Right Honorable SIR FREDERICK ADAM,  
 GOVERNOR IN COUNCIL,  
*&c. &c. &c.*  
*Fort St. George.*

SIR,

With reference to our letter, dated the 3rd of May, 1832, No. 68, submitting the draft of an advertisement inviting prize essays on certain medical subjects, we have now the honor to report the result of that invitation.

2. Within the period fixed by the advertisement, four essays on “Beriberi,” and three on “Rheumatism” and “Burning in the feet,” were received; and it affords us much gratification to be enabled to state, that, although there could be no difficulty in determining those entitled to the prizes, all of them possessed very considerable merit.

3. On examination of the sealed packets, corresponding  
 \* Herewith forwarded for inspection. with the essays,\* which we had unanimously adjudged to be the most meritorious, it was found that Assistant Surgeon J. G. Malcolmson, of the Madras European regiment, is the author of both dissertations.



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[More information](#)

4. This officer's essay on Beriberi, contains a very able and laborious investigation of the causes, nature, and treatment, of that disease ; and is, in our opinion, eminently calculated to impart just views of its nature, and to render its treatment more discriminating and successful.

5. In the essay on Rheumatism, it has been the author's chief object to direct attention to such practical observations, on the varieties of that disease prevalent in India, as may not readily occur to a medical practitioner on his first arrival ; to practical remarks on various disputed points in its history and treatment ; and to a few novel observations, which, if confirmed by the experience of others, are calculated to advance our knowledge of the disease, and to lead to some valuable practical inferences.

6. After the observations just submitted, we need scarcely add, that we consider it highly desirable that the essays should be published, and distributed among the medical officers of this establishment ; and we beg to recommend, that authority may be given for discharging the amount of the prizes.

7. We cannot conclude this letter without bringing particularly to notice the indefatigable zeal, which has enabled Mr. Malcolmson, while discharging arduous professional duties, and exposed to the disadvantages incident to military movements, to produce two dissertations not less remarkable for laborious research, than for original and comprehensive views.

8. As the authors of the unsuccessful essays, some of which possess a high degree of merit, might be unwilling that their names should be publicly known, we will report, in a separate communication, our opinion as to the merits of their respective dissertations.

We have the honor to be,

SIR,

Your most obedient humble servants,

FORT ST. GEORGE, }  
Medical Board Office, }  
16th September, 1833. }

THOMAS H. DAVIES, }  
1st Member, }  
JOHN HAY, }  
2nd Member, }  
K. MACAULAY, }  
Acting 3d Member. }  
Medical Board.

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J. G. Malcolmson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

iv

To

The Medical Board.

GENTLEMEN,

I am directed to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 16th instant, and to state that the Right Honorable the Governor in Council has perused with great satisfaction the report which it contains upon the result of your examination of the Prize Essays on certain medical subjects described in the notice published in the Fort St. George Gazette of the 12th May, 1832. That result is considered to be highly creditable to all the gentlemen who have submitted essays, and especially to Assistant Surgeon Malcolmson of the Madras European regiment, to whom both the prizes have been awarded.

Agreeably to your recommendation, the Right Honorable the Governor in Council is pleased to direct that the amount of the prizes be discharged, and the essays published and distributed among the Medical Officers of this Establishment.

The Right Honorable the Governor in Council observes with great gratification the highly favorable terms in which the zeal, talents and acquirements of Mr. Malcolmson are mentioned in the 7th paragraph of your letter under acknowledgement.

The Right Honorable the Governor in Council considers the report submitted in the separate communication referred to in the concluding paragraph of your letter to be highly creditable to the authors of the essays therein brought to the notice of Government.

I have the honor to be,

GENTLEMEN,

Your most obedient servant,

FORT ST. GEORGE, } (Signed) HENRY CHAMIER,  
24th September, 1833. } Chief Secretary."

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[More information](#)

When the paper on beriberi was submitted to the Medical Board, they were informed in a note attached, that so much time had been occupied in preparing the materials, that the author was obliged to write it at once and to have it copied without correction, and that in consequence, many inaccuracies in the expression and arrangement of the sentences could not be avoided, but that, should the essay meet with the approbation of the Board, these would be corrected and some additional observations communicated. The subsequent appointment of the author as secretary to the Medical Board, having entailed on him the duty of carrying the papers through the press, it has been considered best, carefully to distinguish from the original essays, the additional observations referred to, and such others as his own experience had in the interval suggested, and as have been communicated by his friends or extracted from the records of the Medical Board.

Since the paper on beriberi was printed, the account of the examination of the malkungnee seeds and black oil has been submitted to the distinguished chemist, Mr. O Shaughnessy of the Bengal medical establishment, who concurs entirely in opinion, as to the nature of the oil and of the process by which it is prepared. *Note by the Author.*

## E R R A T A.

- Page 199, line 15, *for* 'whethter' *read* 'whether.'  
,, 232, line 16, *for* 'beriberi' *read* 'barbiers.'  
,, 268, line 45, *for* 'Though' *read* 'Through.'  
,, 321, line 8, *for* 'ædma' *read* 'œdema.'