Edward Jenner: A life in letters

Free admission

The Library, Royal Society of Medicine,
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Edward Jenner: A life in letters showcases a remarkable collection of unpublished letters recently re-discovered in the RSM library and transcribed by staff. The letters reveal a developing correspondence between vaccine pioneer Edward Jenner and one of the RSMs founders, Alexander Marcet, as well as a fascinating insight into some of the issues that afflicted his research during the development of the first vaccine.

...And then page 4 starts from ‘In the following letter.’
The Royal Society of Medicine’s collection of Edward Jenner letters provides a fascinating insight into some of the issues that afflicted his research during the development of the first vaccine.

In the following letter, written by Jenner on the 23rd of February 1803, accusations of exporting ‘spurious’ vaccine matter across Europe proves one such concern. To dispel these allegations, Jenner asks Alexander Marcet to ‘frustrate this malignant design by writing to some of [his] medical friends abroad.’

Jenner also makes mention of a very rare reaction to the vaccine, in which a rash or ‘eruption’ (resembling that of teething) is rendered. He goes on to theorise that this reaction may result from a ‘deviation’ in the vaccine fluid, whereby the fluid taken from a pustule turns from ‘purulent’ to ‘spurious’.
The Copenhagen Report on the subject of vaccination is equally brilliant satisfactory with that of other countries. Nevertheless it strikes me that the virus they employ there has probably undergone some change; a change not sufficient to deprive it of those specific qualities which render it capable of destroying *the Constitution the susceptibility of the contagion of smallpox, but yet sufficient to effect in it some little alteration or derangement in its properties.

[...]

The origin of this Deviation in my opinion is this – the use of the vaccine fluid when taken so late from a Pustule that it was beginning to undergo a change which rendered it incapable of exciting the same effect precisely as if it had been taken at an early period.
I frequently find when a Child has a scabby face, especially if it be accompanied with tinea capitis or papillose eruptions that the purest vaccine virus will produce a pustule that will never contract limpid (?) matter (?), but throughout all its stages its Contents will be purulent - if I inoculate from this source, almost to a certainty I produce a similar Pustule.
‘What substance can be so good as glass for the conveyance of a virus, so peculiarly delicate and liable to decomposition, to distant parts?’

In April of 1803, Edward Jenner wrote to Alexander Marcet thanking him for a set of glasses used to contain and preserve virus matter. Jenner acknowledged the efficacy of glass in containing the virus, having preserved it ‘in this way for seventeen weeks’.
LETTER FROM EDWARD JENNER TO DR. MARCET, APRIL, 1803.

My dear Sir,

I would with the greatest pleasure accept your obliging invitation would the present state of my health permit me, but since I saw you the abominable Influenza has been sticking its Harpy claws deeper and deeper into my Chest. I fear it will not be in my power to attend the meeting tomorrow evening in Salisbury Square; however I shall make an effort as it would afford me great pleasure to meet Dr. Frank there.

I am obliged to you for the glasses you sent me for the preservation of vaccine matter. They are better constructed for the purpose than any I have yet seen. What substance can be so good as glass for the conveyance of a virus, so peculiarly delicate and liable to decomposition, to distant parts? I have known the vaccine virus in full possession of all its specific properties when preserved in this way seventeen weeks. But it must be observed that whatever substance be made use of, the quantity of Fluid collected should not be small. At the expiration of three months some vaccine virus which I had accumulated on a Quill and suspended in a half ounce vial was used with complete success. By the way, from this virus the first patient ever inoculated in the Metropolis recovers the Vaccine disease. It was used at my request by Mr. Gline.

I remain
With great respect, Dear Sir,
Yrs. very faithfully,
E. JENNER.

With respect to the Med. & Physical Journal I shd. be obliged to you to suspend what I have written until you and I have had a conference.
My dear Sir,

I much regret its not being in my power to accept Mr Haldimans obliging invitation to dine with his party at Clapham tomorrow. We shall meet I hope ere long. I have a thousand things to say to you but being now in great haste can only tell you how sincerely I am yours

E Jenner

Saturday 46 Greek St Soho

Dr Jenner

30 May 6
Edward Jenner shares his upset over the 'atrocities' and 'ingratitude' expressed by his colleague (W. Allen). He also fervently states that he will 'not take chair' - of what, is unclear.

I am willing to sacrifice my time, my fortune, indeed I am willing to do anything in support of the cause, except take the chair. This I positively am not equal to, & I most earnestly entreat my xxx is urge it no more. We shall certainly be able to find a much better man. M. W. Smith will be at the meeting but tho' so able in the chair, yet he will do us more service out of it, by (thinking) Mr Adolphus in the display of his false logic.

I am all astonishment at finding that W. has any support at all after holding himself up not only as a masthead(?) in vaccination, but in (showing) in the (turpitude) of his heart in that circular paper where an act of the greatest (kindness) shown him by his xxxxxx W. Allen is brought forth as an act of atrocity. These are but few such examples of (ingratitude) as this on record.
Jenner recalls Dr Pearson's attempts at ruining his reputation. He also makes mention of the College of Surgeons' circular letter regarding vaccination, as well as the report of the College of Physicians (which to Parliament will 'forever set the question at rest with regard to the safety and efficacy of Vaccine inoculation'.

My dear Sir,
I hope within this fortnight to shake you by the hand in Town.

[...]

The College of Surgeons, I find, have sent forth a circular letter for information on the progress (?) of Vaccination, and the result (?) of the practice. The general Report returned by this learned body, will not prove very agreeable to one of the Fellows, the illustrious Mr Birch (?); who, I understand was one of the Committee. I trust the Report of the Coll: of Phys: to Parliament and the decree which will take place in consequence, will forever set the question at rest with regard to the safety & efficacy of Vaccine inoculation.
Edward Jenner apologises to Alexander Marcet for his delayed response to his previous letter, and reassures him that if he is not home when Dr Marcet next pays a visit, he will book an appointment with him.

Dear Sir,

I fully intended paying my respects personally to you in St. Mary Axe, but have been prevented. This I mention as an apology for not sending an earlier answer to your obliging letter. Be assured I shall be at all times happy in being introduced to any friend of yours. You will commonly find me at home till eleven in the forenoon, but if you should chance to call and not see me, pray allow me to make an appointment, that I may not experience a disappointment.
Jenner tells Dr Marcet that he will have a vaccine ready to show him, and details on when and where they will meet.

My dear Sir,
Pray have the goodness to take me by return(?) of the Bearer at what hour I shall see you and Mrs Marcet to ********, and now I will be prepared to **** you with a Vaccine arm(?) in high **** future. Sh’d this notice be too short, or the plan be in the least(?) inconvenient, I will wait on you Thursday in St. Mary Axe. I wish it in were in my power to say Clapham; but ******** as I am at present.
I find it impracticable to pay you my promis’d visit; however I fully intend myself the pleasure ere long.

With best regards to Mrs Marcet
Yrs truly
E Jenner
Edward Jenner refers to the pustule on the arm of one his 'little patients'. A defining symptom of smallpox, these pustules took on the form of a raised, fluid-filled bump with a characteristic dimple at the centre.

My dear Sir,
You have not yet reported to me the **** monograph(?), & now I imagine, almost termination(?) of the Pustule on the arm of my little patient. ***** I have the pleasure of seeing you with my ********** Parts this evening? It w’d afford me great pleasure. I expect a transatlantic(?)

Professor here -
Truly Yours
E Jenner
George Pearson (1751 – 1828) was an early supporter of Edward Jenner’s endeavours into vaccination. Despite their initial collaboration, a rift developed between the pair as Jenner’s reputation grew. As made evident in this letter, their dissonance grew to such a degree that Jenner believed Pearson to be out ‘to ruin his reputation’, ‘to [lessen] the public confidence in vaccination’ and to have ‘join’d the antivaccinists.’

The divide between the two is evidenced in an article from December 1808 in the Medical Observer, which reads: ‘It was discovered that Cow Pox would not securely prevent Small Pox, because Dr. Jenner discovered there were two Cow Poxes, the one (his own) genuine, the other (Dr. Pearson’s) spurious.’ The article goes on to report that The Jennerian Society was established ‘in opposition to Dr. Pearson’.

[Dr Pearson] is at this time most actively employ’d in attempts to ruin my reputation, ****(crossed out?) not only by lessening the public confidence in vaccination but in various other ways. One of his Friends at the Little Senate House in Piccadilly did not scruple(?) to declare that the Doctor’s sentiments on the subject were so changed that he might now be considered as having join’d the antivaccinists.
Jenner discusses a certain MP ('whoever he is') and suggests that he might like to have more knowledge on the vaccine subject.

My dear Sir,

I regret(?) my being absent when your letter arrived, however not much time shall be lost, as our Friend Frank(?) shall pay you an early visit tomorrow morning.

The worth M.P., whoever he is(?), may perhaps like to have his knowledge on the vaccine subject still further increas’d; I have therefore taken the liberty of sending one of ******* with a request (if you see no improperness(?) with it) that you will present it to him; at all events(?) he should see the Spanish Gazette.

Mrs Marcett’s ****** independently of the subject it is intended to celebrate, must gain admiration everywhere. With my best regards to her, believe me.

Truly Yours
E. Jenner
In the following letter, Edward Jenner notes how a case of smallpox after cowpox 'has made noise lately in town'.

The connection between smallpox and cowpox was key to Jenner's inquiry into vaccination; by observing milkmaids who had contracted cowpox, he was able to witness their immunity from smallpox. As the less fatal disease, Jenner concluded that cowpox could be used to protect against smallpox via vaccination.

Our Ladies(?) seem to have lain aside their knotting & netting, & are all becoming Chemists in consequence of two little(?) volumes in the form of Dialogues which have lately got among them. It is said, these nice looking Twins were born at either Clapham or St Mary Axe.

A Case of Smallpox after Cowpox I find has made a noise lately in Town particularly in an enlightened assembly in Boet(?) Court. The elder *****, who vaccinated the Patient some years since tells me the Pustule went ***** through its stages. I doubt the fact a little; as he acknowledges there was a ******** it **** cutaneous affection.

Mrs Jenner begs her best regards to you & Mrs Marcet
with Yours truly
Edw’d. Jenner
Letter 14  
2nd September 1808

Jenner recalls his daughter’s fever. Catherine Jenner (1794 – 1833) was the youngest of Edward Jenner’s three children, alongside Edward Robert (1789 – 1810) and Robert Fitzharding (1792 – 1854).

In this letter, Jenner also refers to an article published in the Medical Observer in September of 1808, a copy of which is held in the RSM’s collection. The article, titled ‘A.Z. on Vaccine Eruptions’, poses speculation against the safety of the smallpox vaccine and accuses Jenner of being ‘totally ignorant of that which he pretended to teach.’

The print that Jenner mentions in his letter, ‘exhibiting four heart’s diseas’d by vaccination’, is not included in the RSM’s edition of the article. What is included, however, is the following ‘Note by the Editor’: ‘It was intended that this communication should be accompanied by a Plate; but in deference to the opinion of friends, the Plate was not inserted.’

Thank Heaven my Daughter is better. She has had a fever which has now pretty well gone through its course. The onset was formidable, & nursing the three or four first days of the disease, my anxiety was extreme. You are very kind in offering me accommodations at Mr Halidmans, and sh’d circumstances require a closer attendance than at present seems requisite, I shall gladly accept of them.

[...]

Have you seen that infamous publication the Medical Observer for the present month? Mr Birch has decorated it with a print exhibiting four heart’s diseas’d by vaccination. How easily he might have added a fifth, by giving his own.
Jenner describes his dissonance with a medical society – and how certain members of this society are 'jealous'.

It seems to be the determination of some of the jealous members of the ***** (R. *** Soc.y), not to suffer the Institution to sink, but on the / Other hand to master up a force, & support it with all possible vigour. I, of course should be happy to see every ***** (Institution?) flourish which had for its object the subjugation of the Smallpox, and was at the same time well conducted. It would be almost unnatural in me were I to shew a backwardness in giving Countenance to the *** Soc.y, but at the same time I cannot help considering myself in a delicate situation as the time may come when the organization of the Government Establishment may under go a change which will admit, without dishonouring myself, of my being one of its members. I hope to have the pleasure of hearing from you sometimes.
Letter 16

25th July 1813

Jenner has been elected an honorary member of the Geological Society, and recalls to Dr Marcet his experiences with mineralogy. He also says that he was going to inquire into the origin of tumors in the liver, but could not, due to his ill health.

My dear Sir

I have long been wishing to convince the Geological Society of the estimation in which I hold the honor which they conferred upon me in electing me an Honorary Member, not by words ******, but by sending some of the mineral productions of my own Neighbourhood. There certainly is a ***** variety; but so scanty is my knowledge of mineralogy that I know not how to describe them to you; and shall therefore only mention at present one of the most conspicuous. There is a Rock about three miles south of this place which contains a mineral which has been used principally for the purpose of repairing the roads. For many years past, it has attracted my attention, and I imagine that it is what has been described under the name “Bryogenite.” It is all crystallized, but breaks into small angular masses, the general character of which is dark, compact, but very gritty, vitreous in texture. It is here that certain of the finest masses of green-blue have been found, and in the most part soft, and liable to be crumbled. Some minerals of various kinds, (some like the described above mentioned) have perforated them, and yielded 4 or 5 sorts of various kinds. Some of the stones contain a white substance, which is soft, but the rock is compactible, without any regularity of form, and much more beautiful than the latter; and lastly, ______. Not far from this Rock on the Coal-Clede near to the Coal-Mine, there is another Rock of a similar quality, but of a more compact kind. From which they appear to have been precipitated by the pressure of the River Severn. The remainder of this letter is broken off.
I hoped to have seen you in Town long before this time, & to have shewn you the result of my Inquiries into the origin of Tumors & ********* of the Liver, but have been prevented by a variety of causes, the chief of which I am sorry to tell you has been ill health. My Medical Friends tell me my indisposition arises from Dyspepsia(?). It may be so, but my symptoms frequently lead me to doubt the accuracy of their decision. If you think any of the mineral I have mentioned worth sending to Town, pray tell me whether it would be proper for me to pay the Carriage & how I must proceed. Make my best comps. to Mrs Marcet & believe me with greatest regard very truly yours Edw. Jenner

Dr Marcet
An invite from Jenner to Dr Marcet requesting breakfast together - as well as an offer of an amygdaloid rock (to be put in the Geological Depot following Dr Marcet's inspection).

My dear Doctor,

Did you not promise that you would do me the favor of taking your Breakfast with me some morning before my departure, or did I make a mistake?

I have brought up a Basket of fragments of the Amygdaloid Rock - will not this tempt you? Not one goes to the Geological Depot till they have pass’d your inspection.

At all events I shall have the pleasure of waiting upon you & Mrs Marcet in Russell Square on Saturday.

Most truly yours

Edw Jenner.
An update on Edward Jenner’s geological ‘fragments’ as detailed in letter #17. Jenner also postpones his visit, and makes mention of ‘that flaming diamond, Mr Worlaston’.

One word, my dear Doctor in reply to your kind note. I cannot go to the Geological Soc.y tomorrow owing to an engagement at Lord Egremont’s but shall certainly bring my fragments to your House on Saturday, where I shall be proud to meet that flaming Diamond, Mr Worlaston. I sh’d like to meet you at the Concert & have taken a ticket but am fearful I cannot get away in time & shall therefore transfer it to a F.d(? - Friend?). Have you made out the ******* business? We must not forget to shew the **** to Dr W.
With kindest Comps(?) to Mrs Marcet.
Most truly Yrs
Edw.d Jenner
Mr dear Sir,
Don’t, I pray you, think me un****(regardless?) of your note. Dr ****(Frank’s?) Book ****(reach’d?) me while I was under the roof of Mr *** ***** (Paytherus?), and went I believe to the College, by mistake with my other foreign books on the subject of vaccination.
As soon as their ****(?) ****(together?) closes, which I expect will be in a few days it shall be ***(sent?) to you.
I make this promise taking it for ****(granted?), the Books I sent there will then be return’d.
Pray present my best wishes to Mrs Marcet, & believe me
Very truly yours
E. Jenner
Edward Jenner reports to Alexander Marcet that he has never had a failure in his vaccine investigations. He also queries into the state of vaccination in Germany, Italy and elsewhere.

I am not conscious of ever having had a failure among my vaccine inoculations and therefore requested my xx Mr Paytherus(?) to say so to the Committee Friday evening. If it was the case of a child of Mr Bodington that could have been alluded to, that was satisfactorily explained to Dr Croft some years ago. It seems an apothecary in the Country inoculated this child with variolous matter, after I had inoculated it in xxxxx with the vaccine, & having produced variolous matter from his puncture(?) foolishly supposed he had given it the smallpox. Two pimples were likewise xxxxxx perceived on the inoculated arm or Breast, xxxxxxxx.
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