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extra

Electricity rendered useful for mental illness: tribute to Richard Lovett

Jesús Pérez, Gianni L. Faedda and Ross J. Baldessarini

A young gentlewoman of the parish of Clifton . . . had hysterics . . . which . . . deprived her of . . . memory and understanding, and . . . continued for a considerable time, notwithstanding the best advice of two eminent physicians. In this melancholic state she was brought to Worcester, to try the effect of electricity . . . As the head was the part affected, I guided the fire chiefly to that part, in as plentiful a manner as I well could, and caused it to pass quite through several times each day, so long as she stayed in town, so though scarce a week, yet it seemed to have the desired effect; for although, before she came to Worcester, she could not remember half an hour to an end, yet, soon after her return home, she could remember most remarkable things she saw done in Worcester; and not only her memory, but her understanding also returned, and she very soon became perfectly well. The operation was sometimes shocks, sometimes drawing off sparks from the head.

Richard Lovett, 1756

Understanding the nature and properties of electricity was a prominent target of experimental investigation in mid-18th-century England. Investigators interested in electricity pursued a range of practical and philosophical interests; they included natural philosophers, physicians, apothecaries, and instrument makers. From different perspectives, they addressed the composition of electric fluid and its role in the economy of nature, including the human body. The phenomenon of electricity proved to be a fertile ground for self-styled 'medical electricians' who spread new applications of electricity, properly tamed, for therapeutic intent.

Richard Lovett (1692–1780), a lay clerk at Worcester Cathedral, markedly enhanced the vitality and diffusion of this discovery, making it accessible to all social strata of society. After years of practice, Lovett published the first English textbook on medical electricity, *The Subtil Medium Prov'd* (1756). His rhetorical term for medical electricity, 'electricity rendered useful', was inspired not only by the flourishing world of public demonstrations and reports in popular magazines, but also by both ancient and recent experimental philosophy on the 'electric fire of the ether', based notably on theories proposed by Isaac Newton. *The Subtil Medium Prov'd* contained descriptions of individuals suffering from various clinical disorders claimed to be cured with electrotherapy. These included what appears to be the first reported systematic use of electric shock to treat a mental disorder.



Engraving by R. Hancock after a painting by I. Wright of Richard Lovett. Image published with permission of the Science Museum/Science and Society Picture Library, London.