African Medicine in the New World

Cotton Mather on Smallpox Inoculation (1716)

An Account of the Method and Success of Inoculating the Small-Pox in Boston (1722)
Smallpox was one of the most common, virulent, and feared diseases of the eighteenth century in America as in Europe, striking down large numbers of Native Americans as well as colonists. During the New England epidemic of 1721, the Puritan preacher and colonial leader Cotton Mather attempted to convince the colony that people should be deliberately inoculated against the disease. It was a technique that he had learned in 1705 from Onesimus, whom he called “my Negro-man.” In this letter to a friend in England, Mather described how he had found out about the procedure.

All that I shall now add, will be my Thanks to you, for comunicating to the Public in Dr Halley’s Transactions, ye Account which you had from Dr Timonius, at Constantinople, ye Method of obtaining and procuring ye Small-Pox, by Insition; which I perceive also by some in my Neighbourhood lately come from thence, has been for some time successfully practised there. I am willing to confirm you, in a favourable Opinion, of Dr Timonius’s Comunication; And therefore, I do assure you, that many months before I met with any Intimations of treating ye Small-Pox, with ye Method of Inoculation, any where in Europe; I had from a Servant of my own, an Account of its being practised in Africa. Enquiring of my Negro-man Onesimus, who is a pretty Intelligent Fellow, Whether he ever had ye Small-Pox; he answered, both, Yes, and, No; and then told me, that he had undergone an Operation, which had given him something of ye Small-Pox, & would forever præserve him from it; adding, That it was often used among ye Guramantese, & whoever had ye Courage to use it, was forever free from ye fear of the Contagion. He described ye Operation to me, and shew’d me in his Arm ye Scar, which it had left upon him; and his Description of it, made it the same, that afterwards I found related unto you by your Timonius.

This cannot but expire, in a Wonder, and in a request, unto my Dr Woodward. How does it come to pass, that no more is done to bring this operation, into experiment & into Fashion—in England? When there are so many Thousands of People, that would give many Thousands of Pounds, to have ye Danger and Horror of this frightful Disease well over with you. I beseech you, syr, to move in, and save more Lives than Dr Sydenham. For my own part, if I should live to see ye Small-Pox again enter into our City, I would immediately procure a Consult of our Physicians, to Introduce a Practice, which may be of so very happy a Tendency. But could we hear, that you have done it before us, how much would That embolden us!

Reprinted from: Letter to John Woodward, from George Lyman Kittredge's introduction to Increase Mather, “Several Reasons Proving That Inoculating or Transplanting the Small Pox, Is a Lawful Practice …” (1721).
The next year a letter from an American to his friend in England added information on the background of the inoculation procedure.

Sir,

Gentleman well known in the City of Boston, had a Garamantee Servant, who first gave him an Account, of a Method frequently used in Africa, and which had been practis’d on himself, to procure an easy Small-Pox, and a perpetual security of neither dying by it, nor being again infected with it.

Afterwards he successively met with a Number of Africans; who all, in their plain Way, without any Combination, or Correspondence, agreed in one Story, viz. that in their Country (where they use to die like Rotten Sheep, when the Small-Pox gets among them) it is now become a common Thing to cut a Place or two in their Skin, sometimes one Place, and sometimes another, and put in a little of the Matter of the Small-Pox; after which, they, in a few Days, grow a little Sick, and a few Small-Pox break out, and by-and by they dry away; and that no Body ever dy’d of doing this, nor ever had the Small-Pox after it: Which last Point is confirm’d by their constant Attendance on the Sick in our Families, without receiving the Infection; and, so considerable is the Number of these in our Neighbourhood, that he had as evident Proof of the Practice, Safety, and Success of this Operation, as we have that there are Lions in Africa.

After this, he heard it affirmed, That it is no unusual Thing for our Ships on the Coast of Guinea, when they ship their Slaves, to find out by Enquiry which of the Slaves have not yet had the Small-Pox; and so carry them a-shore, in this Way to give it to them, that the poor Creatures may sell for a better Price; where they are often (inhumanly enough) to be dispos’d of.

Some Years after he had receiv’d his first African Informations, he found publish’d in our Philosophical Transactions, divers Communications from the Levant, which, to our Surprize, agreed with what he had from Africa.

First, That very valuable Person, Dr. Emancel Timonius, writes from Constantinople, in December 1713, That the Practice of procuring the Small-Pox, by a Sort of Inoculation, had been introduc’d among the Constantinopolitans, from the more Eastern and Northern Asiaticks, for about forty Years. At the first (he says) People were cautious and afraid; but the happy Success on Thousands of Persons, for (then) eight Years past, had put it out of all Suspicion. His Account is, That they who have this Inoculation practis’d upon them, are subject to very slight Symptoms, and sensible of but very little Sickness; nor do what Small Pox they have ever leave any Scars or Pits behind them.