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Letter to the editor

From Molière to SARS-CoV-2: How Medicine has changed



De Molière au Sars-CoV-2 : comment la médecine a évolué ?

At the 400th anniversary of his birth, it is worth remembering the French playwright, actor, and poet Jean-Baptiste Poquelin (1622–1673), better known by his stage name as Molière, and what can still be learned from him. When he finished his education he began his life in the theatre. He left Paris in 1645 with a travelling theatre company and toured the country. At some time he is reputed to have had a part-time employment as a cashier in the establishment of a barber-surgeon where he collected materials for his plays. There he developed a high respect for those who had learned their career through apprenticeship, such as the barber-surgeons where they progressed through common sense and experience. Concurrently he became mistrustful of the arrogant and narrow-minded court physicians [1–3].

In 1658, when Molière's company returned to Paris, it attracted the patronage of the King's brother, Philippe I, Duc de Orléans, and, later, King Louis XIV himself. Molière stayed in Paris, protected by the King from his enemies who did not like the controversial aspects of his satires. He died from pulmonary tuberculosis in 1673 having performed his last play ironically called *Le Malade imaginaire* (the imaginary Invalid). Medical problems became frequent topics in Molière's works [2–4].

In his mature years he wrote seven comedies in which court physicians were satirised. Molière's targeted the medical doctors who worked at the court of King Louis XIV. His criticisms were mostly addressed to the Medical Faculty of the Sorbonne in Paris, whose professors were still wedded to the Aristotelian/ Galenic principles while, in other faculties, such as the Medical Faculty of Montpellier, Paracelsian and Arabic medicine was already practised with success [3].

Molière was neither hostile nor distrustful of Medicine. He criticised with harsh irony the pedantic and sophist attitude of the doctrine of most Parisian academic doctors who were turned into types of charlatans. These physicians neglected important innovations of the time, such as William Harvey's discoveries of the circulation of the blood or the medical use of substances such as quinine and antimony [2]. He chose plays to unmask the claim of these doctors who try to heal diseases on the basis of false erudition and outdated beliefs. The scene in *Le Malade imaginaire* perfectly encapsulates this with the graduation ceremony at the Medical Faculty. During the examination, the doctors ask questions about three diseases, and the candidate recommends the treatment with enemas, blood-letting, and purgation for all the cases, receiving the approval of the examiners. Despite this, it is interesting to note how in Molière's comedies, the patients accept the doctors' advice

and remedies without hesitation, and show great confidence in the person of the physician.

Although in the last decades alternative medicines have been increasingly accepted by parts of, mostly Western, populations, the competence of present-day Medicine is highly respected. Unfortunately the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, and the rapid development of protective vaccination regimes, seem to have further subverted the relationship. Significant numbers refuse vaccination. Massive anti-vax protests with personal assaults against virologists are the symptoms of an increase in credulity, promoted by the infodemic of fake news through the Internet. This has generated a significant distrust in Science that is piggy-backed onto the distrust in governments, politicians and the media. Despite having efficacious and scientifically-proven therapies, the person of the physician no longer inspires the unconditional confidence present in the 17th century. Physicians are no longer gods, and patients are no longer supplicants. If Molière was alive today, one wonders what he would satirise.

Disclosure of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

Funding

No funding sources.

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Available online 24 May 2022