the elements of the inductive method articulated by Francis Bacon in the early seventeenth century—namely observation, hypothesis, experimentation, and data analysis—that allowed Goldberger to prove that pellagra was caused by niacin deficiency, the contributions of other investigators were required to fully clarify the centuries-old mystery of this deficiency disorder. Notable among these is Conrad Elvehjem, a biochemist at the University of Wisconsin, who isolated and characterized the structure of niacin, established a pellagra model in dogs, and demonstrated that purified niacin (nicotinic acid) from brewer’s yeast cured pellagra. Noteworthy, too, is Sir Frederick Gowland Hopkins at Cambridge University, who isolated tryptophan from protein. It was subsequently shown that humans could metabolize tryptophan to niacin, thereby satisfying much of a human’s niacin requirement.

Dr. Bryan has done a masterful job of interweaving the saga of the conquest of pellagra with the fascinating and admirable biography of James Charles Babcock, who weathered twenty-five stormy years of caring for patients with pellagra at the state mental asylum in South Carolina, while passionately and relentlessly supporting and encouraging other physicians and scientists in their search for the cause and treatment of the red plague of pellagra. But the story isn’t complete. Questions remain for today’s young scientists in the health professions to contemplate: for example, why was pellagra much more prevalent in women?

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The Lament of the Navel

In my heyday
I was the linchpin of life,
a three vessel thoroughfare
role-playing the command
for go forth and multiply.
The ebb-and-flow
of a divine miracle,
the oxygen lorry
for a living being.
Until that final day.
My incubation,
triumphantly
poured out
like a priceless piñata
precipitated into daylight.
The blinding snip
of surgical shears
as we separate.
Cold clamps of conclusion.
Lack of acknowledgment.
Humiliation worsened
by days of dangle,
the center of attention.
Everyone waiting
for me to fall off
so that it is finished;
A blind pouch
of disgrace;
life-giver to
lint trap.

Aaron McGuffin, MD

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