

Seven Words about Nutrition: Jean Trémolières, Lavoisier, Hippocrates, Maistre Chiquart, La Rochefoucauld, James Lind and Florence Nightingale

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Abstract

Dedicated to my dear friend, the late Brazilian nutritionist Fernanda Tirelli (1960-2019), this article provides basic information about Nutrition, a science whose roots date back to Ancient Greece, more specifically to the time of Hippocrates, the father of Medicine. Along with Hippocrates, six other important names in the field of Nutrition (Jean Trémolières, Lavoisier, Hippocrates, Maistre Chiquart, La Rochefoucauld, James Lind and Florence Nightingale) are given a prominent place in the lines that follow. Rough edges, inadequacies and errors in general that remain are mine.

Keywords: Nutrition; Jean Trémolières; Lavoisier; Hippocrates; Maistre Chiquart; La Rochefoucauld; James Lind; Florence Nightingale

*Our bodies are our gardens, to which
our wills are our gardeners.*

William Shakespeare



Ancient Greece, homeland of Hippocrates.

Introduction: Jean Trémolières, Lavoisier, Hippocrates and Maistre Chiquart

Nutrition is the branch of science that concerns the nutrients that are necessary for a living being to grow, reproduce and keep healthy. Its close connection with Medicine is obvious, particularly when it comes to the prevention and cure of diseases like obesity, for instance – always bearing in mind that “contemporary societies create obese people, but they abhor them”, as the French physician and professor Jean Trémolières (1913-1976), one of the pioneers or modern Nutrition, said in 1975¹. As for the paternity of Nutrition, the French nobleman and chemist Antoine-Laurent de Lavoisier (1743-1794), martyr of the French Revolution (1789-1799), is one of the most suitable candidates, since what we now call *metabolism* (i.e., the chemical processes through which food and oxygen are transformed into heat and water within a living body, giving birth to energy) was discovered by him in 1770. A few decades later, the main elements that form the food (carbon, nitrogen, hydrogen, and oxygen) could be properly isolated and have their connection with health duly proved². This does not imply, however, that Lavoisier was the first to realise the essential connection between food – which is not only a biological need, but also an element that has a strong cultural component – and the survival, growth, reproduction, well-being and illness of an organism³. The Greek Hippocrates (c. 460-c. 370 BC), father of Medicine, more than two millennia earlier, had already perceived such fact and attested the importance it carries for us as well as for all living beings in general. His is the famous advice: “Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food⁴.” Hippocrates knew the importance of food for the health and wellness of human beings. In Hippocrates’ Greece, as well as in ancient Western Europe and in many parts of Asia, foods and

medicaments were synonyms. For example, “the juice of liver was squeezed on the eye to treat eye diseases, connected to Vitamin A deficiency. Garlic was used to cure athlete’s foot, and eating ginger was thought to stimulate the metabolism⁵”. Appeared in c. 1420 in what is now France, Maistre Chiquart’s – master chef of Amadeus VIII, Duke of Savoy – *Du fait de cuisine* (“On cookery”) emphasizes the importance of hygiene in the art of cooking, which attests that the relation between food and health was not ignored in Medieval times, which were not so “dark”, as legend has⁶.

La Rochefoucauld and James Lind

Around a century before Lavoisier, his countryman François VI, Prince de Marcillac (1613-1680), better known as Duc de La Rochefoucauld, author of the celebrated *Maxims (Réflexions ou sentences et maximes morales)*, was already following the same path, as we can see by one of his famous sentences: “To eat is a necessity, but to eat intelligently is an art⁷”. Only one generation older than Lavoisier, but having died in the same year as him, the Scottish physician James Lind (1716-1794) entered the British Navy in 1739 as a surgeon’s mate. After eight years serving in the Mediterranean, off the coast of West Africa and in the West Indies, Lind had already gathered a large experience in his field. In 1747 he “saw that sailors were developing scurvy, a deadly bleeding disorder, on long voyages. He observed that they ate only non-perishable foods such as bread and meat. Lind decided to feed one group of sailors’ salt water, one group vinegar, and one group limes. Those given limes didn’t develop scurvy. And although Vitamin C wasn’t discovered until the 1930s, this experiment changed the way physicians thought about food, creating a market for nutrition careers⁸”.

¹Quoted in Jean-Pierre Poulain. *Sociologie de l’obésité*, 3rd ed., Paris, PUF, 2014, p. 31; see also T. Depecker et alii. <https://www.cerim.org/actualites/le-pr-jean-tremolieres-1913-1976-lorigine-de-la-nutrition-a-la-francaise/>.

²Apart from his remarkable contributions to the sciences, Lavoisier also dedicated a significant part of his time and fortune to assist his fellow men in several different fields, notably agriculture, industry, and sciences in general. As his contemporary Lagrange said on his beheading, “*Il ne leur a fallu qu’un moment pour faire tomber cette tête, et cent années peut-être ne suffiront pas pour en reproduire une semblable.*” (“It took them only an instant to cut off this head, and one hundred years might not suffice to reproduce its like” [Charles Herbermann et alii. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antoine_Lavoisier; see also Katja Fieder et alii. *Brockhaus, die Bibliothek: Kunst und Kultur*, Leipzig, Brockhaus, 1997, v. V, pp. 87 and 141]).

³See Sylvain Gouguenheim. *Aristóteles y el islam: las raíces griegas de la Europa Cristiana* (translated from French into Spanish by Ana Escartín), Madrid, Gredos, 2009, p. 19 et passim.

⁴Quoted in Dr. Henry Bieler. *Richtige Ernährung: deine beste Medizin* (translated from English into German by Horst H. Emker), Freiburg im Breisgau, Hermann Bauer KG, 1975, p. 313.

⁵<https://www.naturalhealers.com/blog/nutrition-history/>.

⁶Notwithstanding, noteworthy famines did occur in Western Europe during the Middle Ages (cf. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318543063_Food_and_Cookbooks_Medieval; and Thomas Woods Jr. *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization* [with a new Foreword from Cardinal Antonio Cañizares], Washington, Regnery, 2012, pp. 9-25 et passim).

⁷Quoted in <https://www.naturalhealers.com/blog/nutrition-history/>.

⁸<https://www.naturalhealers.com/blog/nutrition-history/>.



Paris: gastronomy capital of the world.

Conclusion: Florence Nightingale

Born in 1820, the British Florence Nightingale remains the most notorious woman of the Victorian Age (1837-1901), being Queen Victoria the only exception. In addition of being a social reformer and a statistician, Nightingale founded what may be called Modern Nursing, and achieved prominence as a manager and trainer of nurses during the Crimean War (1853-1856); in that occasion, she organised care for wounded combatants. Miss Florence Nightingale gave Nursing a glowing reputation and became an authentic symbol of the Victorian Era, namely as the tireless “the Lady with the Lamp”, who used to spend a whole night available to her patients “armed”, if we can say so, with nothing more than a simple lamp. As the writer Mark Bostridge has demonstrated in his Nightingale’s biography, one of her most important achievements was “the introduction of trained nurses into the workhouse system in Britain from the 1860s onwards. This meant that sick paupers were no longer being cared for by other, able-bodied paupers, but by properly trained nursing staff. In the first half of the 19th century, nurses were usually former servants or widows who found no other job and therefore were forced to earn their living by this work. Charles Dickens caricatured the standard of care in his 1842-1843 published novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* in the figure of Sarah Gamp as being incompetent, negligent, alcoholic, and corrupt. According to Caroline Worthington, director of the Florence Nightingale Museum, ‘When she [Nightingale] started out there was no such thing as Nursing. The Dickens’ character Sarah Gamp,

who was more interested in drinking gin than in looking after her patients, was only a mild exaggeration. Hospitals were places of last resort where the floors were laid with straw to soak up the blood. Florence transformed Nursing when she got back [from Crimea]. She had access to people in high places and she used it to get things done. Florence was stubborn, opinionated, and forthright but she needed to have those things to achieve all that she did”.

As if all this were not enough, Florence Nightingale invented also what came to be known as “Clinical Nutrition”. Before her there were no such person as a professional nurse, nor such idea as that of patients being properly fed; her totally innovatory work led to the foundation of nothing less than the Red Cross. In 1910 she died “at the enormous age of ninety in the reign of Edward VII⁹”. With Florence Nightingale we close this short article about seven important figures in the field of Nutrition. Of course, much more could be said and written about them, let alone Nutrition itself, a science so intrinsically connected to Medicine that their application fields very often overlap. This is precisely the case of Hippocrates, a character commented in these lines which come to an end. Always bearing in mind that, among the ancient Greeks, “art” (τέχνη) and “science” (ἐπιστήμη) were interchangeable terms, I see no better close end for this article than Hippocrates’ sentence according to which “Life is short, art long, opportunity fleeting, experiment dangerous, judgement difficult¹⁰”.



Florence Nightingale.

⁹ Roy Strong. *The Story of Britain From the Romans to the Present*, London, W&N, 2018, p. 392; see also Katja Fieder et alii. *Brockhaus, die Bibliothek: Kunst und Kultur*, op. cit., v. V, p. 642.

¹⁰ Quoted in *Científicos Griegos* (translated from Greek into Spanish by Francisco de P. Samaranch), Madrid, Aguilar, 1970, p. 81.



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