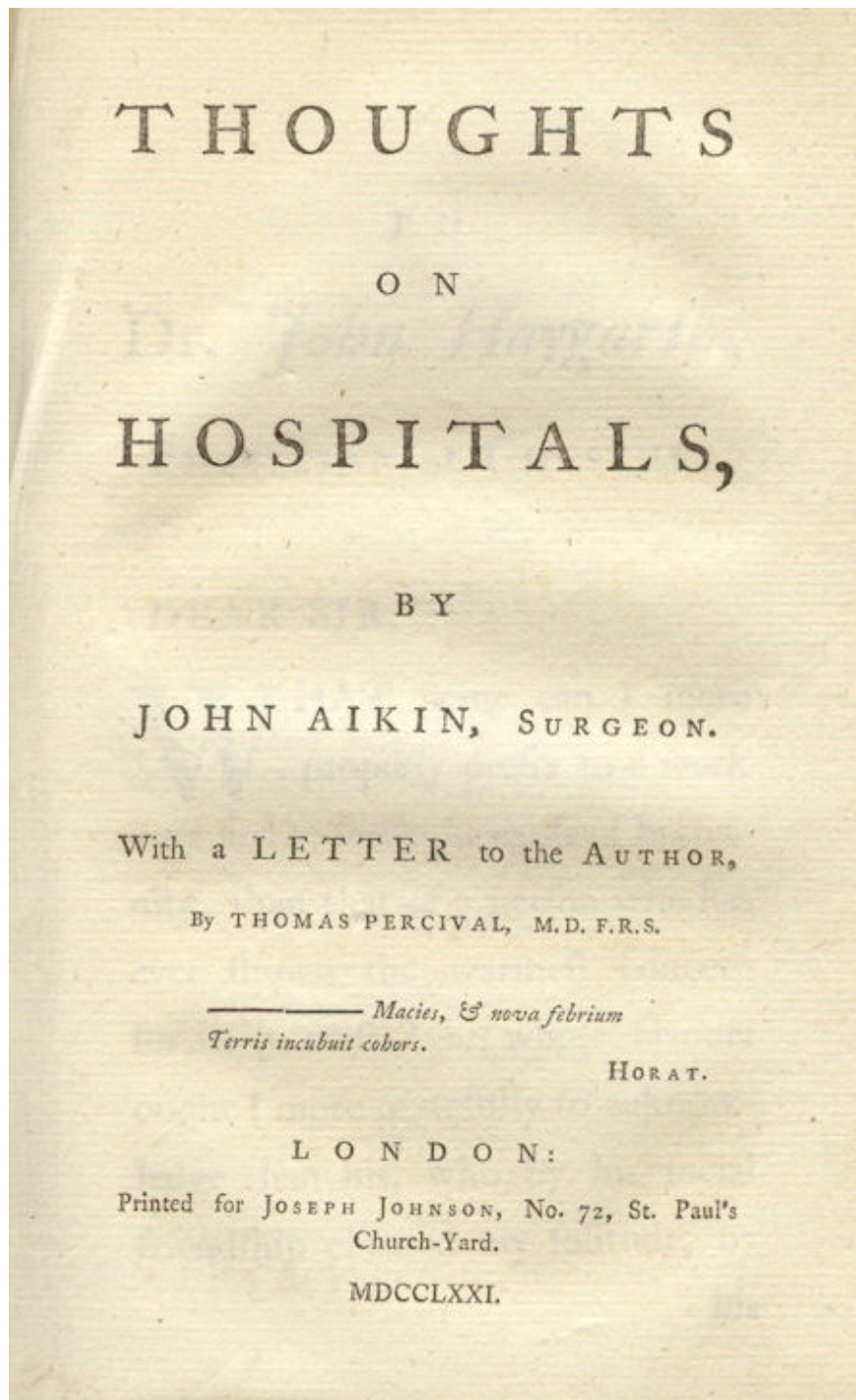


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Aikin J (1771). Thoughts on hospitals. London: Joseph Johnson.

Title pages**Key passages**

NOT only the continuance, but the improvement of medical knowledge, is greatly indebted to hospitals for the opportunities they afford of *experimental practice*. I am aware that the very name of *experiment* occasions great outcries and prejudices among the vulgar; and that it is apt to startle some well-disposed persons of a superior class; but as this appears to be owing to wrong ideas hastily taken up concerning the meaning of the term, I do not doubt by a little explanation to render it evident, that such a mode of practice, in the manner in which it ought to be, and really is conducted, is not only defensible, but in the highest degree laudable.

THE healing art has its original foundation in *experiment*. Accident at first made known the virtues of a remedy in some particular disease. Upon the pro-
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per attestation of this accidental success, men were induced to try its efficacy in the next case of the same kind that offered. After repeated *experiments* of this sort, they went farther, and from analogical reasoning ventured to apply the remedy not only in the same disease, but others which either from their cause or symptoms appeared similar. Analogy led them next to vary the remedy, and other substances resembling it in sensible qualities were tried, upon the supposition of their possessing similar virtues. Thus from a series of *experiments*, a settled mode of practice was at length instituted; and in medicine, as well as in other sciences, men began too soon to refer to the authority of others, instead of continuing the progress towards improvement. Yet while diseases continue obstinate and fatal, and the medical art is so far short of perfection, it is evident that there can be no reason for censuring any attempts

tempts to improve it by the same method as it began.

THE great advances which have within a century past been made in all the concomitant branches of medical knowledge, that of the structure of the human body, the nature of diseases, and the general qualities of medicines, must certainly render experimental practice much safer than formerly. How ignorant soever we may be in many cases of what is useful, we are always able to judge very speedily of what is likely to prove hurtful. The faculty will readily confess that they are often obliged to lament the limited benefit of their art, and the fatality of many diseases unconquerable by any means hitherto discovered; but they deserve the justice of having it also acknowledged, that they are neither so rash, obstinate, or ignorant, as not to avoid doing mischief where they can do no good. I refer to every
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authenticated account of the trial of new medicines or methods of cure, for the very great caution with which it is made. The best attestations of their safety, and the clearest analogical reasoning of their probable utility, are generally required; and when any peculiar hazard has seemed to attend their exhibition, we have seen the faculty in several instances, with the most public-spirited boldness make repeated experiments upon themselves, before they ventured to try them upon the meanest of their fellow creatures. I think we may challenge any set of men to show more clear and unequivocal proofs of zeal for the public good.

HOSPITAL patients are on several accounts the most proper subjects of an experimental course. The constant superintendence of persons skilled in the management of the sick, and accustomed to obey orders, and the confinement

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to strict regulations of diet and regimen, are advantages not to be had in an equal degree in private practice, either among the poor or the rich. A number of such cases as from their obstinacy and fatality require some uncommon attempts for their cure, is easily collected in hospitals; and opportunity is thereby given for all those gradual steps, and minute variations, which contribute to render an experiment both safe and decisive. The tenderness of a practitioner's reputation, when concerned for a person within the eye of the public, and exposed in every step to the notice of prying and conceited by-standers, is too apt to render his practice timid and narrow; he will be contented with going on in the beaten track, and will be satisfied if he comes off with the credit of having neglected nothing that is usually done according to the common forms. In a hospital he is free from this restraint,
and

and may exert his genius in any new thought for the benefit of his patient, though unsupported by precedent. Yet he can have no motive to persist in an unsuccessful trial, since it is plain that it cannot answer his end of improving the art. In fact, most of the modern improvements in medicine and surgery, have taken their rise from hospital practice; consequently these patients have reaped the first benefits from them; and thereby numbers of the poor have met with relief in deplorable cases, which without the benefit of these institutions, and the spirit of rational experiment, would in all probability have brought them to a miserable end.

It is mortifying to think that all these advantages are in general so ill understood by those for whom they are designed; and it is a striking instance of unreasonable prejudice, joined to weak credulity,

credulity, that the very people who would not on any account enter a hospital, though attended by men of the most approved skill and humanity, will without hesitation commit themselves to the care of an itinerant quack, whose whole practice is nothing but random guesses, and presumptuous rashness.

T H E E N D.