



SPECIAL ARTICLE

Historical review of our knowledge of acute pancreatitis[☆]

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Abstract Acute pancreatitis is one of most common causes of consultation due to abdominal pain in medical emergency units and it requires hospital admission. Although the majority of cases are mild and patients tend to recover quickly, a small percentage of cases is severe, with mortality in the region of 5–10%. This historical review considers how our understanding of this disease has changed since it was first described in 1579 thanks to the contributions of renowned experts such as Nicolaes Tulp, Reginald Fitz, Nicholas Senn and many others who, through their expertise and dedication, have improved the survival of patients with this disease.

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Revisión histórica de algunos conocimientos sobre pancreatitis aguda

Resumen La pancreatitis aguda es una de las principales causas de consulta por dolor abdominal en las unidades de urgencias médicas y requiere hospitalización. Aunque la mayoría de ellas son leves y se recuperan rápidamente, hay un bajo porcentaje que tienen una evolución grave y su mortalidad es del 5–10%. En este artículo se realiza una revisión histórica de las vicisitudes que ha sufrido esta enfermedad desde su primera descripción en 1579 y que va ligada a nombres tan prestigiosos como Nicholaes Tulp, Reginald Fitz, Nicholas Senn y otros muchos que, con sus conocimientos y esfuerzo, han mejorado la supervivencia de los pacientes con esta patología.

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Introduction

Alexander the Great died in 323 BC, a few days before his 33rd birthday. He had returned to Babylon after his latest conquests near the Indus River in the East. To celebrate this, he and his generals held a great banquet where copious amounts of food and alcohol were consumed. The next day, Alexander complained of abdominal pain, which gradually got worse, and he died 12 days later.

For many years, the most widely accepted theory to explain this outcome was poisoning. However, according to the historian Robin Lane Fox, the most common poisons at that time were strychnine and hellebore and both have sudden effects. He therefore thinks it is very unlikely that Alexander could have survived 12 days if he had been poisoned.¹ It has also been suggested that he may have died from malaria, as there was an outbreak in the city of Babylon at the time. However, in 1986, Simmy Bank (Moorreesburg, South Africa, 1931) suggested that this may have been the first case of acute alcohol-related pancreatitis, although this can never be proven.²

Despite the fact that different anomalies in the pancreas had been described since ancient times using the Greek word *skirros* or the Latin word *scirros* (tumour, hard), no specific disease linked to this organ had been described in detail. However, in 1788, Thomas Cawley published his post-mortem findings for a 34-year old diabetic patient whose pancreas was full of calculi.³ As a result of his observations, he suggested a probable connection between diabetes and the appearance of the pancreas, although he was unable to establish the cause or consequence.

These two publications may show the two extreme forms of pancreatitis: the first, acute and rapidly fatal, and the second, chronic with long-term progression.

Various forms of this inflammatory pancreatic disease have been described over the last 125 years, resulting in different classifications. The first widely accepted classification was that of the 1963 Marseilles Symposium,⁴ after which a number of different categorisations have been proposed. This article presents the different authors who have described or played a part in describing and improving understanding of this disease, which affects a large part of the population.

Initial descriptions and subsequent findings

The first ever description of signs and appearance of the pancreas attributable to acute pancreatitis was published in Basel in 1579 by Iacobo Auberto Vindone (1500?–1587), a Huguenot doctor who had performed a post-mortem on an alcoholic patient with a necrotic pancreas (Fig. 1). Almost three-quarters of a century later, in 1652, Nicolaes Pietersz Tulp (Amsterdam, 1593–The Hague, The Netherlands, 1674), a renowned Dutch doctor and anatomist, published a description of the signs and anatomical findings of a pancreatic abscess that he had observed in a young man who died after suffering from back pain, low-grade fever, insomnia and agitation in his fourth book, *Observationes medicae*.⁵ Years earlier, in 1632, Nicolaes Tulp had been immortalised by Rembrandt (1606?–1669) in the painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* when he was

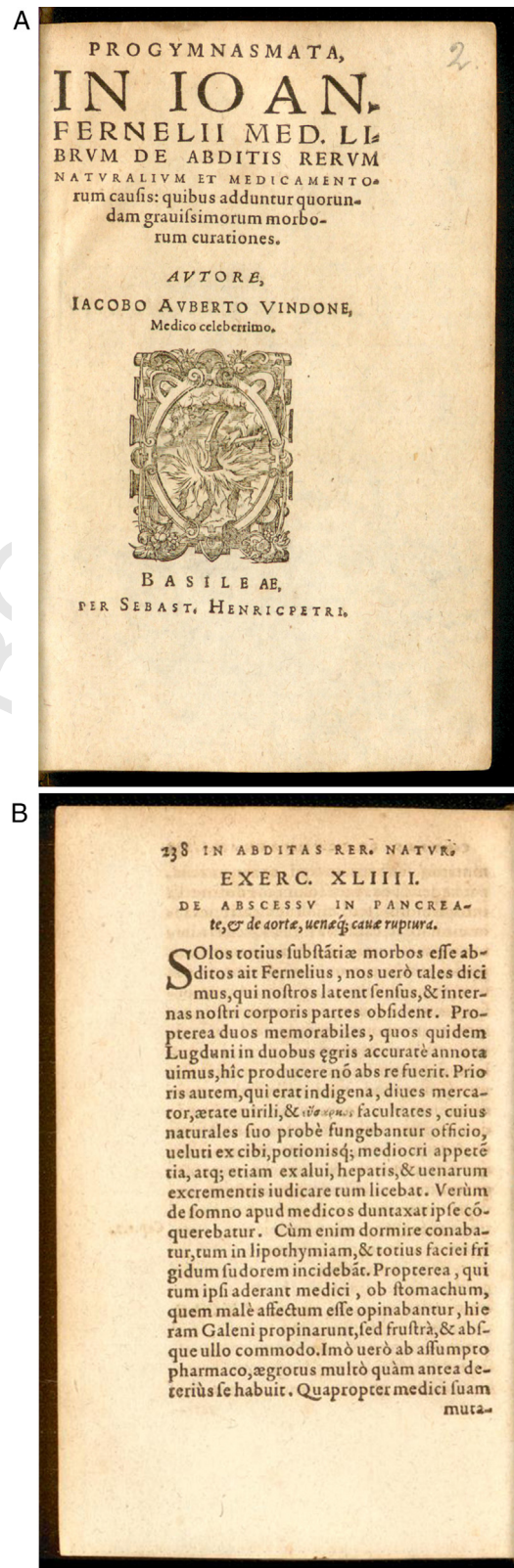


Figure 1 (A) and (B) Book published by Iacobo Auberto Vindone in 1579 describing the post-mortem findings of an alcoholic patient with pancreatic necrosis for the first time.

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