



Editorial

William Dock, Willie Sutton and Sutton's Law

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A recent article on Milton, Sutton and Mutton [1] prompted me to write this editorial. Although many know that it was William Dock who originated the term “Sutton's Law” in medicine, few know the circumstances under which this term came about. It might be timely to recapitulate what I wrote in 1999 [2].

Around 1960, a medical student at Yale toiled relentlessly to document the presence of schistosomes in the liver of a young female Puerto Rican patient. Dock, a visiting professor at the time, had suspected the diagnosis of schistosomiasis in this patient and said, just off the top of his head, “Why don't you apply Sutton's Law?” The derivation of the term is as follows: when Willie Sutton, a hold-up man, was being interviewed by newsmen, he was asked why he always robbed banks. Sutton, with some surprise, replied, “Why, that's where the money is.” [3]. The diagnosis of schistosomiasis was, indeed, proven by a positive liver biopsy done by the student [4].

That would have been the end of the story except that there had been two Yale physicians on that teaching round, Robert Petersdorf and Paul Beeson, who were working on a phenomenon called FUO, or fever of unknown origin, which had the whole medical profession baffled. A year later, they published their paper on “Fever of Unexplained Origin,” [3] in which Sutton's Law was recounted in a footnote near the end of the article, “We are indebted to Dr. William Dock for the term Sutton's Law. It recommends proceeding immediately to the diagnostic test most likely to provide a diagnosis, and deplores the tendency to carry out a battery of ‘routine’ examinations in conventional sequence....”. Although Dock was the inventor of “Sutton's law,” Sutton himself denied ever saying that [5]. Nevertheless, it remains a useful instrument for teaching medicine.

Dock has often been called Osler of the modern day, because of his immense wisdom, independent thought, inquisitive perception, and a sense of humor [2]. As can be seen from one of his postcards to me while visiting the home town of Wenckebach (Fig. 1), he thought nobody would remember Sutton's Law or its inventor very long. Fred's

article [1] proved him to be wrong. Dock was the kindest man I ever met. In his retirement in Paris, he even offered to serve as a tour guide for me and my wife (Fig. 2). I, however, did not take up his offer in reverence for his advanced age; he was 83 at the time.

On a more personal note, Dock was also a very devoted husband. His first wife, Eugenie M. Malard, a nurse, died of a fatal aspiration of a foreign body [6]. He then married her sister, Maia, or Marie-Stephanie Malard, also a nurse. In his final decade of life after retirement from medicine, he moved to Paris with Maia, being a lifelong Francophile. He outlived his second wife by a decade (Fig. 3).

I went into some details about William Dock, the inventor of “Sutton's Law”, because as the old Chinese saying goes “when drinking the water, think of the man who dug the well” (Fig. 4). I hope your readers enjoy reading my dissertation about Dock, the inventor of Sutton's Law.

Acknowledgment

The author of this manuscript has certified that he complies with the Principles of Ethical Publishing in the International Journal of Cardiology [7].

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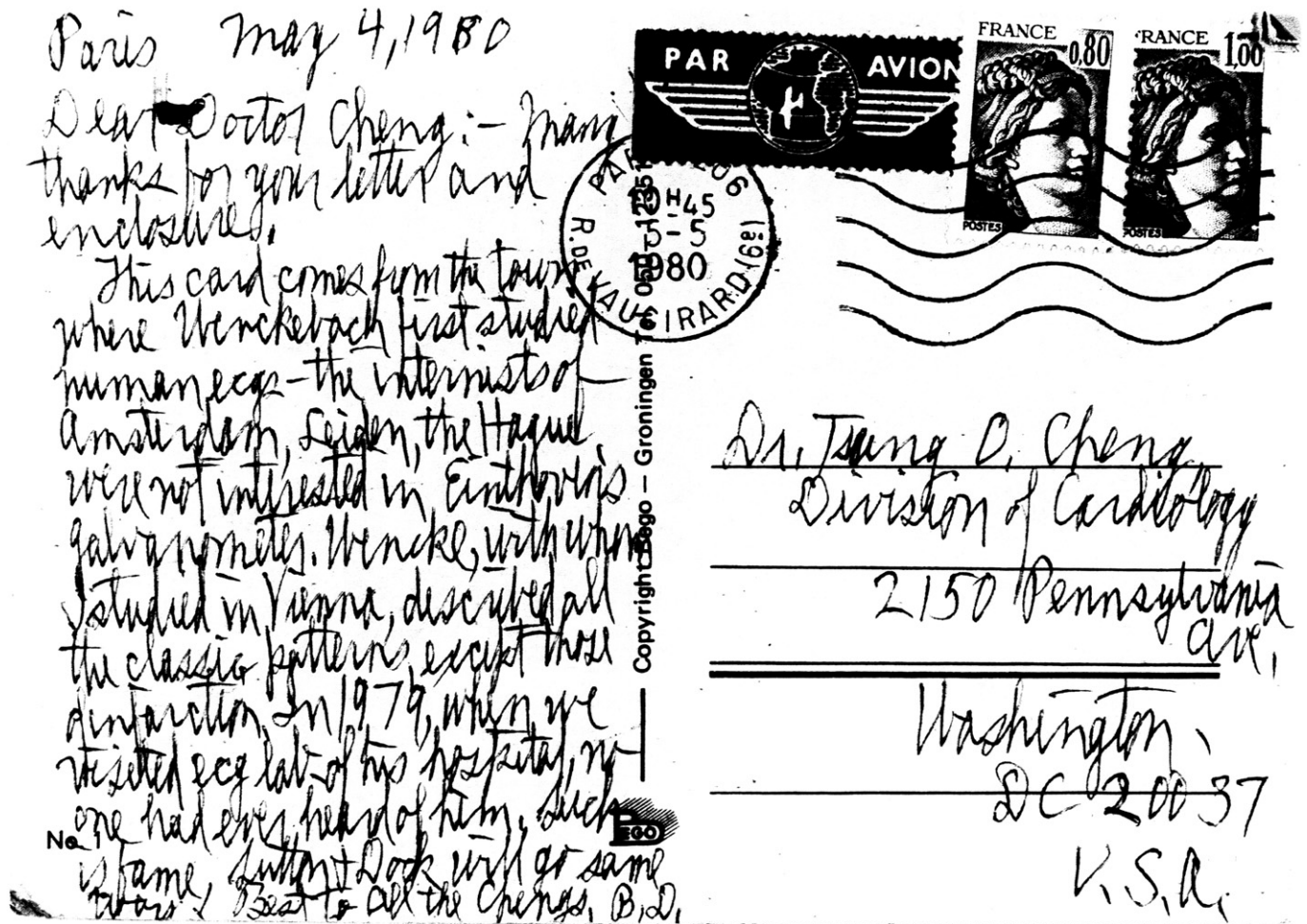


Fig. 1. A postcard to the author from Dock who was visiting Wenckebach's laboratory in Groningen in 1980. Note his reference to Sutton of Sutton's Law at the end of the card.

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