Richard Morton: treatment of anorexia nervosa in a male

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Richard Morton, an English physician, writing in 1689, is usually credited with the first description of anorexia nervosa. The opening chapter of A Treatise of Consumptions is entitled “Of a Nervous Consumption”: Morton provides two case histories, one female; the other, male.1

The Son of the Reverend Minister Mr. Steele, my very good Friend, about the Sixteenth Year of his Age fell gradually into a total want of Appetite, occasioned by his studying too hard, and the Passions of his Mind, and upon that into an Universal Atrophy, pinning away more and more for the space of two Years, without any Cough, Fever, or any other Symptom of any Distemper of his Lungs, or any other Enrôle, as also without a Looseness, or Diabetes, or any other sign of a Colliquation, or Preternatural Evacuation. And therefore I judg’d this Consumption to be Nervous, and to have its seat in the whole Habit of the Body, and to arise from the System of the Nerves being dis-temperr’d. I began, and first attempted his Cure with the use of Antiscorbutick, Bitter, and Chalybeate Medicines, as well Natural as Artificial, but without any benefit; and therefore when I found that the former Method did not answer our Expectations, I advis’d him to abandon his Studies, to go into the Country Air, and to use Riding, and a Milk Diet (and especially to drink Asses Milk) for a long time. By the time of which he recover’d his Health in a great measure, though he is not yet perfectly freed from a Consumptive state, and what will be the event of this Method, does not yet plainly appear.

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1. Various authors have pointed to other case histories or descriptions of anorexia nervosa, but Morton’s is generally cited as the first. For more information, see the note at the end of the text.