

MD REMEMBERS: A Great French Clinician

■ Dr. Jean-Nicolas Corvisart des Marets, the father of modern French clinical medicine and Napoleon's favorite physician, died on September 18, 1821, less than five months after his famous patient. In the 15 years that he was Bonaparte's trusted doctor and outspoken friend Corvisart also treated Josephine and Marie-Louise but he suffered a stroke and retired to his estate at La Garenne soon after Napoleon was exiled to St. Helena.

A keen observer and astute diagnostician, Corvisart published an important treatise on the ailments and lesions of the heart and large blood vessels. He described the symptoms of aortic aneurysms, the presystolic *bruissement* of mitral stenosis, the facies characteristic of cardiac insufficiency and chronic hypertrophic myocarditis, a disease that bears his name. His expanded translation of Leopold Auenbrugger's work on percussion resulted in the adoption of this valuable diagnostic technique.

Corvisart referred to the human body as "this astounding machine" and said the patient must be regarded as "a mobile painting" that must be continuously studied and compared with the healthy organisms. On hospital rounds he reminded students that the patients were the necessary "books" and in offering a prognosis of a case he considered the social conditions in which the patient lived.

Background. A member of one of the oldest families in the Ardennes, Jean-Nicolas Corvisart was born February 15, 1755 in the small village of Dricourt. At an early age he was sent to Vimille, near Boulogne, to live with his maternal uncle, a parish priest who supervised the boy's education. In spite of reports that he was a lazy, mischievous and quarrelsome lad with little aptitude for learning he matriculated at the Collège de Sainte-Barbe when he was 13. His father, a solicitor to the crown, wanted him to become a lawyer but Jean-Nicolas was bored with legal briefs and spent much of his time visiting hospitals.

At the Hôtel-Dieu, Corvisart was fascinated by the physicians' dis-

courses and decided to abandon law for medicine. Since his father refused to support him he worked as a hospital orderly, attended lectures in his free time, and gained the attention of the noted surgeon Pierre Joseph Desault who gave him the assignment of preparing



anatomic specimens for the classes.

In 1782 Corvisart received his degree and delivered his inaugural address as a licentiate "On the pleasures of the study of medicine and the unpleasantness of medical practice." Named parish physician to Saint-Sulpice, he continued his studies at the Charité hospital and when its medical school was established in 1795 Corvisart was appointed professor of medicine. Two years later he gained a wider audience when he became professor of practical medicine at the Collège de France. He introduced critical diagnosis at the bedside, and stressed the importance of "the medical training of the senses." His own perception was so acute that he said of a certain portrait: "If this picture is a faithful one, I cannot doubt that the original must have died of heart disease." An investigation showed that he was correct.

Corvisart reminded his students that an honest physician "will have no hesitancy in acknowledging his ignorance." He wrote in his aphorisms: "The physician must restrain himself from the mania of attempting to explain everything. He must remember that... he can only be an observer of nature, never her

confidante." Among the pupils who were inspired by his teaching were René Laennec, inventor of the stethoscope, scientist Georges Cuvier, surgeon Guillaume Dupuytren and Pierre Bretonneau.

Bonaparte's Doctor. Napoleon was the powerful first consul and Corvisart was a fashionable prosperous practitioner when they met in 1799 and immediately liked one another. After the clinician successfully treated him for a cough and prescribed a lotion for his scabies, Bonaparte named Corvisart his first physician and later made him a commander of the Legion of Honor and baron of the empire. Napoleon jokingly called his distinguished doctor a big charlatan but he respected his judgment and enjoyed their discussion during the physician's Wednesday and Saturday morning visits.

Josephine, Napoleon's sister Pauline as well as the queens of Holland and Spain were patients of Corvisart and during Marie-Louise's pregnancy he prescribed bread pills for her neurotic symptoms. When the infant Napoleon II was born, the physician reminded Bonaparte of his meteoric rise and said: "The child should fulfill your last wish. . . . Stop, Sire, or destiny may desert you and then nothing remains but downfall and disaster."

Bon Vivant. A vigorous, broad-chested man of medium height, Corvisart had finely chiseled features, a high, wide forehead which he refused to cover with a wig. In his early years when a powdered wig was a prerequisite for a post at the hospital founded by Mme Necker, he declined the appointment noting that "respect for outward signs must not degenerate into superstition."

During the revolution Corvisart is said to have married a girl from a noble family to legitimize his son but when the child died he obtained a divorce and resumed the life of a gay bachelor. He enjoyed hunting, the company of pretty women, and filled his palatial home with magnificently bound books, objets d'art, bronzes and paintings by many famous artists.