



**“What the Doctor Ordered: Dr. Benjamin Rush
Responds to Yellow Fever” Vocabulary**

This list includes medical terms and other words related to symptoms and treatments described in in the Rush letters.

Asafetida (also spelled "asafoetida"): A dried latex found in the root of Ferula, an herb found in Iran and India. Used medicinally as a digestive aid and antifatulent.

Balm Tea: A liquid or semi-liquid substance, often fragrant, that soothes through being applied to the skin, eaten, or drunk.

Benjamin Rush: Famous Philadelphia patriot, doctor, and public figure who treated many patients during the 1793 Yellow Fever epidemic.

Blister: Pocket of fluid contained in the upper layers of the skin, usually caused by some form of irritant including burning, freezing, or chemical contact. Eighteenth-century doctors purposefully gave patients blisters so that the blisters could be drained, believing that removing blister fluid from the body would also remove disease-causing toxins.

Bowels: The gastrointestinal tract.

Calomel: A chemical compound of mercury and chloride. It was used as a diuretic and purgative in medicine until the 1860s. Today it is considered highly toxic and is not used as medicine.

Camphorated Spirit: Better known as camphor spirit, a substance derived from the Asian camphor tree and mixed with some form of alcohol. It is administered to the patient by inhaling or rubbing on the skin.

Chamomile [Camomile] Tea: A hot beverage made from the chamomile plant thought to relax those who drink it and encourage sleep.

Cremor Tartar: Cream of tartar. It is commonly used in modern cooking but was also administered as a diuretic or purgative in the eighteenth century.

College of Physicians of Philadelphia: An elite, private medical organization founded in Philadelphia in 1787. Dr. Benjamin Rush and many other leading Philadelphia doctors were members.

Consult: Discuss a problem with someone else.

Copious: Substantial, much, many, a lot.

Dejected: Sad, discouraged.

Diagnostics: A characteristic doctors use to know if a patient has a certain illness.

Dregs: The last remaining small amounts of a liquid or solid, often found at the bottom of a holding vessel, like a cup or barrel. The word is often used to describe something dirty or bad.

Diuretic: A medicine meant to empty the body of sickness-causing toxins through the urine.

Enema: A process by which a gas or liquid is injected into the rectum in order to empty its contents.

Excoriate: To remove part of the skin, through rubbing, cuts, or disease.

Fatal: Deadly.

Feces: Solid human waste.

Fetid: Rotten.

Flatulency: Passing of gas.

Flaxseed Tea: A hot brewed beverage made from flax, also known as linseed. Flax was thought to ease abdominal discomfort.

Glauber [“Globber”] Salt: Sodium sulfate, or, the sodium salt of the sulfuric acid. It was named after Dutch/German chemist Johann Rudolf Glauber (1604-1670), who discovered it in spring water. Once used as a cathartic and diuretic, it is no longer used for medicinal purposes.

Glyster: An enema. Also known as clyster, a substance injected into the lower intestines to encourage discharge of waste. It was sometimes administered to patients who could not take swallow medicine due to sickness.

Hazardous: Dangerous.

Hysteria: Excessive emotion; loss of touch with reality (perhaps because of illness).

Induce: Bring about.

Inflammation: Part of the body’s response to the presence of germs. Common symptoms of inflammation include pain, redness, and swelling.

Jalap: The dried root of several plants from the morning glory family. It has been used as a purgative.

Laudanum: A mixture of opium and alcohol. It was used to treat numerous sicknesses, especially coughs. It is a powerful narcotic (or drug that influences the central nervous system) and is very addictive.

Malignant Fever: Yellow Fever.

Mercury: A metallic chemical element sometimes called quicksilver. Historically, mercury was used as a medicine in the form of chemical compounds including calomel (see below). Today mercury is considered highly toxic. Its use is carefully regulated by government agencies but does have some modern medical applications.

Noxious: Toxic, highly unpleasant.

Opening: A movement of the bowels, resulting the excretion of solid human waste.

Opium: A drug made from the opium poppy. It is also used to produce heroin. While illegal for recreational use in many countries today, opium once was widely used in medicine.

Perspiration: Sweat.

Physician: A medical doctor.

Powder: Dried, crushed medicinal mixtures of various herbs and chemicals. They were dissolved in liquids (either alcohols or water). The medicines described in Rush's letters as "powders" are most likely diuretics and/or purgatives designed to rid the body of Yellow Fever.

Practice: Professional actions. In this context, how doctors decide to treat their patients.

Prevailing: Common, widespread.

Purgative: A medicine meant to empty the digestive tract of its contents through solid human waste. It was thought that this process would also empty the body of sickness.

Quill: A goose feather pen, up to a fourth of an inch in diameter.

Recipe: A description of the kinds and amounts of ingredients to use in making a medicinal drug, and how to combine them.

Reverend: A term used to indicate that a person is a pastor or priest.

Rhubarb: A plant commonly used in cooking and baking today. When used as a medicine, dried rhubarb increases the flow of saliva. Large doses are purgative. It is generally administered medicinally in powder form.

Secretaries: In this context, Irwin refers to the report drafted by the College of Physicians regarding the cause and treatment of Yellow Fever.

Stool: Solid human waste.

Suffused: Spread all over.

Swoon: To feel faint.

Treachery: When a close friend whom you trust disagrees with you, or works against you.

Tumeric: A member of the ginger family. It is a traditional medicine thought to be useful in curing fever and various stomach ailments. It is also thought to be anti-inflammatory.