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psychiatry in history

Sir Thomas Browne: *Boulimia Centenaria*

Greg Wilkinson

Sir Thomas Browne (1605–1682), a polymath, practised medicine in Norwich. He communicated the case report below, which was read by his son to the *Royal Society* on 1 February 1672. Sir Thomas supposed that the cause was *sal esurinum*: the ‘hungry salt’, regarded as promoting gastric digestion and appetite by van Helmont in 1624.

There is a woman now living in Yarmouth named Elizabeth Michell, an hundred and two yeares old; a person of 4 feet and an half high, very leane, very poore, and living in a mean roome, with pitifull accomodation. She had a sonne after she was past fifty. Though she answers well enough unto ordinary questions, yet she apprehends her eldest daughter to be her mother, but what is most remarkable concerning her is a kinde of Boulimia or dogge appetite. She greedily eating day and night whatever allowance friends or charitable persons afford her, drinking beere or water, and making little distinction or refusal of any food, either of broathes, flesh, fish, apples, peares, and any coarse foode which shee eateth in no small quantity, in so much that the overseers for the poore have of late been forced to augment her weekly allowance. Shee sleeps indifferently well till hunger awakes her, then she must have no ordinary supply whither in the day or night. She vomits not, nor is very laxative. This is the oldest example of the *Sal esurinum chymicorum* which I have taken notice of. Though I am ready to afford my charity unto her yet I should be loath to spend a peece of Ambregis I have upon her and to afford her 6 grains to every dosis, till I founde some effect in moderating her appetite, though y^e be esteemed a great specifick in her condition. (Royal Society Archives: CL.P/14i/14.)

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