Nicolaas Tulp (1593-1674)

Asha Pai-Dhungat*, Falguni Parikh**

Many readers who are familiar with Rembrandt’s masterpiece, “Anatomy lessons of Dr. Tulp” may have overlooked the medical background and contributions of Dr. Nicolaas Tulp. He was an anatomy teacher and practicing physician of repute in Amsterdam, not a figurative character. His Latin name was Nicolaus Petrus. He came to be known as Tulp, because an auction place for tulip bulbs was located in front of his house, and a tulip flower was carved on his entrance door.

Tulp conducted anatomical demonstrations in Theatrum Anatomicum. They were open to medical profession and by invitation, to lay persons as well. Dissections were held once a week. Rembrandt’s famous painting was commissioned by Surgeon’s Guild on “Schools of Anatomy”. The selection of Tulp as the central figure may have been related to physician-patient relationship enjoyed by Rembrandt and Tulp. The spectators have been identified, as well as the cadaver, who was a criminal, hanged in 1631. Spielmann detected an anatomical error in the painting (1925), that flexor digitorum sublimis arises medially from the elbow, not laterally as depicted.

Tulp’s practice attracted an extensive clientele. However, he was civic minded and served as a judge, treasurer and Mayor, for the city. He compiled a treatise in Latin, on medical experiences and professional conclusions, entitled observationum medicarum libritres. One of the numerous clinical observations in the book, mentions a young boy, who sustained an injury to the left side of his head, which was followed by contralateral paralysis of his body. Nicholas Tulp also gave spina bifida its name and first description.

Description of vasa lactia and ilioacceal valve (valva Tulpi) are his well known contributions. Valvula ileoacaealis, was discovered earlier by Casper Bauhin from Switzerland, but was re-described with illustrations, for the first time, by Tulp (1632). While his clinical findings in Beriberi are original, the first European description, was given by his countryman, Jacobus Bantus (1517).

The shift from earlier European anatomy, to “New Science”, is based mainly on assertions of Vesalius, Harvey and Paret. It gained scientific support and replaced the medieval anthropocentric, Catholic view. Tulp is remembered, for his few scientific contributions and the celebrated Rembrandt’s masterpiece.