

medical treatment for centuries. But some physicians began to question the practice in the 1700s. Not Rush. And as the most famous doctor in the Colonies, his opinion carried a lot of weight. His refusal to stop using bloodletting to treat all illnesses alarmed other physicians.

Rush also gave his patients powerful special concoctions designed to clear the body of disease-causing fluids. Called “thunderbolts” or “thunderclappers,” the pills were so strong that they caused vomiting and diarrhea. They contained mercury and other chemicals, which are *toxic* and are known today to be deadly poisons.

Yet, Rush made positive contributions, too. He was sure that the city’s filthy streets and uncollected garbage were harmful to people’s health. In an age before indoor plumbing or toilets, human and animal waste polluted wells. The contaminated water caused illness. Rush stressed the importance of a clean environment.

Rush believed strongly in education, both to maintain well-being and to prevent illness. Most 18th-century Americans did not bathe regularly. Rush encouraged good personal hygiene. He recommended the use of soap. He lectured on ways to keep homes clean. And he promoted eating vegetables and getting exercise as the way to good health.

Rush warned against the use of alcohol, too. He recognized alcoholism as a disease that was harmful to a person’s health. At the time, it was common to drink alcohol to protect against intense heat or cold.

Laborers also drank liquor to restore their energy after hard work. Rush warned against that use.

He gave the following recommendation

Toxic means poisonous.

regarding liquor: “The principles of animal life are the same in a horse as in a man; and horses, we find, undergo the severest labour with no other liquor than cool water.”

Dr. Benjamin Rush’s theory of disease was wrong. His use of bloodletting weakened rather than helped his patients. His dedication as a physician and an educator, however, left a major impact on America’s emerging medical profession. And his dedication to his patients—most noticeably for people living in poverty and for people suffering from mental illness—established his reputation as the most famous doctor in the Colonies. +

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DID YOU KNOW?
Rush Medical College was the first medical school in Chicago. It was one of the earliest medical schools in the Midwest. It was the first to require a fifth year of study to earn a degree. It opened in 1843 with 22 students. The college is now affiliated with Rush University Medical Center.

Pennsylvania Hospital was founded in part to provide better care for the city’s residents with mental illness. Rush oversaw its growth in that area.

