

¿Quién lo usó por vez primera?

Ensayo clínico (I)

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La investigación terapéutica experimental no se entiende hoy en medicina sin el concepto fundamental de «ensayo clínico». Al rastrear sus orígenes, más que dar con el primer registro escrito de la expresión en sí —¿y cuál debería ser esta, por cierto: *clinical study*, *clinical trial*, *experimental testing*, *controlled study*, *medical research*, *clinical test*, *treatment trial*, *medical experiment*?—, me ha interesado saber quién fue el primer médico que llevó a cabo un ensayo clínico; el primero que dividió a una población de pacientes en dos o más grupos para comparar directamente en ellos los resultados de sendas intervenciones terapéuticas cuya eficacia relativa pretendía evaluar de modo experimental.

Para los médicos de habla inglesa, la cosa parece estar clara: el primer ensayo clínico data de mediados del siglo XVIII, cuando el escocés James Lind, cirujano naval, demostró mediante un estudio comparativo de diseño impecable —y tamaño muestral ínfimo— la eficacia antiescorbútica de la vitamina C, ¡siglo y medio antes de que se descubrieran las vitaminas! El propio Lind describió de forma pormenorizada el protocolo seguido para su ensayo clínico en el capítulo «Of the prevention of the scurvy» de su *Treatise of the scurvy*. He aquí su relato:

On the 20th May, 1747, I took twelve patients in the scurvy on board the Salisbury at sea. Their cases were as similar as I could have them. They all in general had putrid gums, the spots and lassitude, with weakness of their knees. They lay together in one place, being a proper apartment for the sick in the fore-hold; and had one diet common to all [...]. Two of these were ordered each a quart of cyder a-day. Two others took twenty-five gutts of *elixir vitriol* three times a-day, upon an empty stomach; using a gargle strongly acidulated with it for their mouths. Two others took two spoonfuls of vinegar three times a-day, upon an empty stomach; having their gruels and their other food well acidulated with it, as also the gargle for their mouth. Two of the worst patients, with the tendons in the ham rigid, (a symptom none the rest had), were put under a course of sea-water. Of this they drank half a pint every day, and sometimes more or less as it operated, by way of gentle physic. Two others had each two oranges and one lemon given them every day. These they eat with greediness, at different times, upon an empty stomach. They continued but six days under this course, having consumed the quantity that could be spared. The two remaining patients, took the bigness of a nutmeg three times a-day of an electuary recommended by an hospital-surgeon, made of garlic, mustard-seed, *rad. raphan.*, balsam of *Peru*, and gum myrrh; using for common drink barley-water well acidulated with tamarinds; by a decoction of which, with the addition of *cremor tartar*, they were gently purged three or four times during the course.

The consequence was, that the most sudden and visible good effects were perceived from the use of the oranges and lemons; one of those who had taken them, being at the end of six days fit for duty. The spots were not indeed at that time quite off his body, nor his gums sound; but without any other medicine, than a gargarism of *elixir vitriol*, he became quite healthy before we came into *Plymouth*, which was on the 16th *June*. The other was the best recovered of any in his condition; and being now deemed pretty well was appointed nurse to the rest of the sick. [...] I shall here only observe that the result of all my experiments was, that oranges and lemons were the most effectual remedies for this distemper at sea. [Lind, J. *A treatise of the scurvy. In three parts. Containing an inquiry into the nature, causes, and cure, of that disease. Together with a critical and chronological view of what has been published on the subject.* Edimburgo: Kincaid y Donaldson, 1753. Disponible en línea en: <www.jameslindlibrary.org/trial_records/17th_18th_Century/lind/lind-experiment.pdf>.]

Esto nos cuentan nuestros colegas de habla inglesa. Pero rebuscando entre libracos y papeles, he conseguido dar con un ensayo clínico comparativo, también de diseño impecable y bien documentado por escrito, pero realizado ¡dos mil trescientos años antes que el de James Lind! Los interesados pueden leerlo en la pág. 89 de este mismo número de *Panace@*.