

**LETTRE ÉCRITE A MONSIEUR OLDENBURG ... PAR JEAN DENIS ...
TOUCHANT LES DIFFÉRENTS QUI SONT ARRIVÉZ À L'OCCASION DE
LA TRANSFUSION DU SANG**

TRANSLATION BY PHIL LEAROYD

The full title of this letter, written by Jean Denis to Henry Oldenburg is 'Lettre ecrite a Monsieur Oldenburg Gentilhomme Anglois, & Secrétaire de l'Académie Royale d'Angleterre, par Jean Denis, Docteur en Medecine, & Professeur ez Mathematiques. Touchant les differents qui sont arrivez à l'occasion de la transfusion du sang' [i.e. Letter written to Mr. Oldenburg, English Gentleman, & Secretary of the Royal Academy of England, by Jean Denis, Doctor of Medicine, & Professor of Mathematics. Touching on the differences that happen on the occasion of the transfusion of blood]. This letter was written on the 15th May 1668 and a copy of it is available to read or download from:

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5788995z/f3.item>

Mr Henry Oldenburg was the editor and publisher of the *Philosophical Transactions* journal of the Royal Society and an extract of this letter was in fact published in the 15th June 1668 edition of this journal, which is titled 'An extract of a printed letter, addressed to the publisher, by M. Jean Denis, D. of physick, and prof. of mathematicks at Paris, touching the differences risen about the transfusion of blood'. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, 3, 36, 710-715.

<https://royalsocietypublishing.org/toc/rstl/1668/3/36>

See also:

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=ucm.5324351296&view=1up&seq=100>

This extract faithfully reproduces the major points made in Denis's original letter regarding the issues surrounding the death of Antoine Mauroy following an alleged third blood transfusion and the suspicion that the patient's wife Perine Pesson was suspected of poisoning her husband with arsenic. It provides an insight into the views expressed by Jean Denis regarding these incidents as well as a summary of the Chastelet court ruling made by the Criminal Lieutenant on the 17th April 1668, that has been identified by many authors of being the reason why the operation of blood transfusion fell into disuse in France and other countries after this date. As such, the contents of this letter have a pivotal position in the history of blood transfusion in the 17th century. I have therefore provided an English translation of this letter in the hope that it allows the content to be seen by a larger audience. I have tried to produce as accurate a translation of the original document as the text allows, given that some words and terms do not now have a reliable modern French equivalent, but also that there are some obvious misprints and/or spelling errors within the text, which also includes the trans-positional use of the letter u and the use of the long-form letter s in the printed text. Although I have taken great care not to misrepresent the author's original meaning I cannot guarantee that this work does not contain 'translational errors' and the reader is recommended to check specific details against the original French text.

NOTE: A number of words within the document cannot be read due to its poor reproduction in places which have resulted in unreadable gaps within the text. These gaps are identified in the translation below by the use of [- -] which may represent one or more words.

Letter written

To Mr. Oldenburg English Gentleman, & Secretary of the Royal Academy of England

By Jean Denis Doctor of Medicine, & Professor of Mathematics

Touching on the differences that happen on the occasion of the transfusion of blood

Sir,

You have significantly obliged me and to have assured me by your last of April 29, that the London Magistrates never had the thought of giving any arrests for defending the practice of blood transfusion; but that, on the contrary your doctors continued to search for them with great success. The enemies of new discoveries had taken so much care to publish all this false news to decry in some way this operation, that it would take no less than a testimony as authentic as yours to disabuse most of it. If one undertook to write to dispel all the false rumours they make about this matter, one would always have to keep pen in hand and give up all other better occupations: but what is good in this matter is that people of spirit are so put off by these kinds of slander, that they no longer listen to them with sadness and with disgust. And for me personally I proposed to myself not to write anything more that some new experiences had not previously supported my first conjectures. But your last two letters urge me so honestly to share secret intrigues with you, that some individuals have made to embarrass the history of this mad man, who was cured six months ago by means of transfusion, that I should not be able to dispense with sending you a summary of what has happened so far on this subject, until the thing is entirely decided by gentlemen of the parliament, who will be, I believe, the judges and the arbitrators.

You have known how the transfusion of the blood of a calf had so tempered the ardour and the broths of the blood of a mad man, who for four months had been running day and night naked in the streets of Paris, that he fell asleep two hours after the operation, and after a ten-hour sleep he was awake in a very staid sense, and that he had persisted in this good state for two months or so, until the too frequent company of his wife, and his excessive debauches of wine, tobacco and brandy would have caused him to fall into a very violent and dangerous situation. You have also been able to know how this operation had completely opposite effects at the same time, and that for a single brain that it had refreshed, it had heated many others, since by curing the madness of a poor wretch, it disturbed the wisdom of several smug people, who have no other goal than to signal themselves by fighting all new discoveries, that they themselves are not able to do. Indeed, it had hardly been three or four days since this man had been cured, when these base and evil spirits began to publish everywhere that he died in our hands, and that we had put an end to his extravagances by causing him to lose his life. This first backbiting having been convinced of falsehood by several people worthy of faith who saw him every day, they corrected their fable, and proposed to make believe on all occasions that he had relapsed into his first extravagances, and that he was even more carried away than ever. What obliged the first President and several other people of quality to make him come to their homes to examine the truth of it themselves; and after having entertained him for some time, they all agreed that the effect of the transfusion had been surprising in this meeting, and that there was much malice in the minds of those who spread rumours contrary to what they saw.

You have learned all this from the letters which have been printed on this subject: but what you perhaps did not know, nor did many others, and which is however the main thing to notice in this matter, is that these envious spirits were not the only ones to whom this treatment caused some trouble. The patient's wife received the most violent attacks from it, notwithstanding that she was sufficiently deceitful to make us appear to the contrary, and to persuade us that she was thinking of nothing else than

to relieve him in all his illnesses. The fact is, that this man who has been a lackey all the time, and since a chamber valet, he had no profession which could bring some subsistence into the house, and which could have him considered by his wife. A lady of quality that he had served, had promised to have him given charge of guard at the house of the Prince, but his deplorable state had always been an impediment to the good will she had for him. And in truth the time of his madness was not so dependent on his wife, as that of his staid sense. Because instead of having the freedom to make certain visits and live as she fancied when he completely abandoned his room to go to sleep in the streets; on the contrary, she was very embarrassed and restrained by his presence, for he observed her too closely, and could not help but reproach her incessantly because she had tried several times to poison him, and he often even made appear some marks of jealousy, that he had conceived against her conduct. These are the complaints that she even made to several people worthy of faith who felt obliged to bring it to justice, to give to know this misunderstanding which was undoubtedly the source and the origin of the unfortunate event which ensued.

Indeed this poor man having fallen ill, his wife made efforts beyond what one would imagine, to engage us to give him a third transfusion, until threatening us that she would present a request to the Attorney General to order us to do what we absolutely refused. And finally she came to me one day early in the morning, and not having met me there, she told my people that she begged me earnestly to have the charity to return after dinner to her house, where she was to hold some meeting. I went there and met with Mr Emmerez, and having learned that she had had a calf prepared, and that she wanted her husband to have a transfusion to cure him, she said, as we had done two months ago. We wanted to go out right away, and told them that her husband was not disposed to this operation, and that he was not in a state of being able to attempt it with some hope of success. She threw herself before us with tears in her eyes, and by an infinite number of clamours, she urged us not to go out without giving her this consolation, that she would have tried all possible remedies to escape her husband. Her artifices were great enough to make us condescend to try if there would be no way to bring some relief to her husband. Mr. Emmerez to satisfy her inserted a cannula into the vein of the patient's arm: and as it is a necessity to draw blood from the veins when one wishes to introduce it again, he opened the vein of the foot to this effect. But a violent shaking having seized him at the same moment with a trembling of all his limbs, no blood came out of the foot any more than from the arm. This forced Mr. Emmerez to remove the cannula he had put in the vein of the arm without loosening the artery of the calf, as it must be to communicate blood; and thus the transfusion was not absolutely done.

This poor man died the following night, and the news having been brought to us, we went there the next day with Mr. Emmerez and another surgeon; and we remembered the complaint that the deceased had often made that his wife wanted to poison him. We made all our efforts to open the body in the presence of the seven or eight witnesses. But the resistance of this woman was so great that it was impossible for us to carry out our plan. As soon as we were gone, she did all her diligence to have her husband buried as soon as possible. But as she was in the last need, she could not do so well, that the day is not spent in asking for some charities to pay for a beer and to incur other small costs which are necessary on this occasion. So that a famous doctor of the Faculty of Paris, having met in the evening at a lady's house, whose charity was solicited [- -] the same thought we had: and although he was very late, he did not stop looking for surgeons to open the body in her presence. But the wife of the deceased having learned of his resolution, employed all possible lies and artifices to elude his purpose. And on the threats made to him that we could come back the next day, or this doctor with a strong hand; she had her husband buried an hour before daybreak, and gave no other reason to those who were with her, except that she feared that the body had been opened in spite of herself.

So soon as the news of this death was published, the enemies of the experiment triumphed to see so beautiful a field opened to their calumniates, they did not neglect this favourable opportunity, and we did not fail to see a short time later unseemly defamatory libels appearing against us, which were dedicated to doctors of Paris, and approved by doctors of the same Faculty. I resolved then to take the silence for my share, not believing that the authors, under whose names these insults were passed on, deserved no response, and that there was even honour to be committed with them. But this silence would only further sour the spirit of those who supported them. And I was quite astonished that two months later they came to warn me that three doctors who did not move from the home of the widow, and that they solicited her with great promises of recompense, only to use her name to accuse us in court of having contributed to the death of her husband by the transfusion, and that they even address themselves to this woman's neighbours to urge them to act as false witnesses against us. And some time after this woman, swollen with the beautiful hopes that these gentlemen had given her, came to tell us that doctors were extremely solicitous to her against us, and that she had always rejected them, knowing well the obligation she owed us for having rescued her husband without any interest. These good warnings, not having benefited her with anything, and having drawn no recompense from us, as she had expected, she immediately changed them into threats, and we were told that in the pressing need to which she found herself reduced, she would be obliged to accept the offer made to her by certain doctors, if we did not have the kindness to assist her with something. I sent her back to say by messenger that she and these doctors needed a transfusion even more than her husband did and that I hardly bothered myself about their threats. Yet it was then that I believed that the silence had to be broken, and it was not about my interest, but it is up to the public to make known these illustrious doctors who had such a dark and low spirit as to amuse themselves with these intrigues unworthy of men of letters. I made my complaint about it to the Criminal Lieutenant, who immediately allowed me to inform, and against the widow and against those who solicited her. Some witnesses having appealed before justice testified strongly against three doctors and this woman, whom they accused of having secretly given certain powders to her husband, which could well have contributed to his death. This information consists of five witnesses having been represented in full hearing to the Criminal Lieutenant by Mr. Dormesson, King's Advocate. He ordered by sentence that the woman would be adjourned to appear in person to be questioned on my information, and that however new information would be made against her at the request of the Crown Prosecutor. And because he believed that there would be danger of [- -] indifferently permitting the practice of transfusion to all kinds of people, he pronounced *ex officio* that it would not be done in the future except by ordinance of the doctors. This is what you will see more about in this Sentence.

SENTENCE AT CHASTELET

By the Criminal Lieutenant on 17 April 1668

To all those who will see these present letters, Pierre Seguier Chevalier Marquis de Saint Brisson, Lord of Ruaux and Saint Firmin, ordinary gentleman of his Chamber, & Guard of the Prevost and Viscount of Paris; Greetings. Know how: That on the request made in judgment before us in the Criminal Chamber of the Chastelet of Paris by Magister François Mulo, Attorney of Mr. Jean Denis, Doctor of Medicine plaintiff and applicant; the Crown Prosecutor joined, and for the purposes of his request, and exploit of the 9th of this month, tending so that by pronouncing on his complaint and information; defences be made to the accused named afterwards to rescind her speeches, and insults, and reparation, forfeit, and expenses. Against Magister Gilles de Trappu, Attorney of Perine Pesson widow of Anthoine Mauroy

present in person, defendant and accused, and plaintiff and complainant. Parties hearing in their pleas and remonstrances, and [- -] noble man Magister André le Febure proud Dormesson King's Advocate in his pleadings, who said that by the information he had communicated, there is proof of seven considerable facts.

1. That the operation of transfusion was performed twice on the man named Mauroy, and that it was attempted a third time. That it has done so well both times, that the patient was wanted to be seen for two months after in the best possible way, and in perfect health.

2. That during the first two operations his wife gave him eggs and broths, and slept with him four times, notwithstanding the defence of those who treated him, and that she took him to her house without telling them about it, although Mauroy had difficulty in suppressing her presence and returning with her.

3. That since then he went from cabaret to cabaret, and took tobacco, and having fallen ill again, his wife usually gave him brandy to drink, and gave her broths in which she mixed certain powders, and which Mauroy complained that she wanted to poison him, and that she gave him arsenic in her broths, she prevented the assistants from tasting it, and having pretended to taste it herself, she threw on the ground the broth which she had taken in a spoon.

4. That when Mauroy had frequent quarrels with his wife, she overcame it by several strokes, sick as he was, and that when she received a blow from him, she said that he would repent when he had to die of it.

5. That when the transfusion on Mauroy was attempted for the third time, it was at the urging of his wife, who had a calf brought in for the first time unnecessarily, because those who had to do the operation refused. to work without permission from the Attorney General. That a few days later, she had another calf brought, and the operation was started, but hardly any blood came out of the patient's foot or arm, a cannula had been inserted which had made him cry out, so that according to appearances no calf's blood had passed into the [- -] the operation, and he died there [- -].

6. That this woman did not want to suffer that those who had performed the operation open her husband's body. That she refused the same thing to another doctor who wanted to have it opened in her presence, and that for reason of refusal, she said that her husband was in the coffin, although he had not yet been there.

7. That long after the death of said Mauroy, three regular doctors asked the said woman to take money to complain and to say that the transfusion had killed her husband. What she said when these people left her house, that they came there for this; and unless those who had carried out the operation gave her the means to return to her country, that she would do what they urged her to do. That a witness testified that she came to find him to beg him to warn those who had performed the operation, that if they did not give her to live for the rest of her life, she would accept the offer that the doctors made to her.

That another witness testified that a man had come to find him on behalf of a doctor, and had offered him twelve golden Louis if he would testify that the said Mauroy had died in the operation of the transfusion.

That the matter was important enough to be investigated, that this woman was charged to examine where she had taken these powders, why she gave them to her husband? and by whose order? why she prevented the opening of the body by a lie?

that he would require to be more fully informed: and that however she was taken to the body.

That with regard to the three [- -], who have solicited her by offering her money to prosecute those who had made the transfusion, and who had been at her home, he would require that they be adjourned to appear in person.

And finally that since the transfusion had been successful the first two times, that it was not attempted the third until after the woman's prayers, who, moreover, had so badly kept the orders of those who had performed the operation, and who was suspected of having given rise to the death of her husband, he would require that she be charged for the execution of the decree of personal adjournment awarded against them.

We have the information made at the request of the Mulot party joined to other information made at the request of the Trapu party by us decreed of personal adjournment; and that the Trapu party (the widow) by us decreed of personal adjournment will be required to represent itself in state of personal adjournment and undergo questioning on the said information. Will be more fully informed by the Commissioner of Court of the content of the complaint and information from the Mulot party at the request of the Public Prosecutor. And now we take efforts to stop all people from making a transfusion on any human body, but that the proposal has not been received and approved by doctors of the Faculty of Paris, under penalty of prison.

In witness of this, we have sealed these present. This was done & given by Magister Louis Deffita Adviser to the King in his Councils and Criminal Lieutenant, holding the evidence on Tuesday the seventh April one thousand six hundred and sixty eight.

Since this sentence we have made new information, which is much stronger than the first, and we have discovered witnesses, to whom the woman had confided that it was arsenic that she mixed in her husband's broths, and the same as the deceased, having given the remainder of one of these broths to a cat, this animal died of it after a few harsh days. And with regard to the doctors who approached this woman, they are better described in the second report than in the first, and one cannot make them pass for young schoolchildren, since one of them has gray hair, and another has been transported there several times in long clothes, and on horseback.

As for the transfusion, it is not absolutely defended by this sentence, since to do it freely, there would only have to be the approval of a few doctors from Paris, and at present we have seven or eight who have signed the proposal. It is not what I wanted, to use it for the practice of this operation; because the doctors of Montpellier, Rheims and other universities of France, who hold the first places in Paris with their Magisters, the Princes and Princesses of the blood, the first Magistrates and other people of quality, are in some way hurt by this sentence; they do not think they are obliged to await the judgment of the doctors of Paris, in being able to order any operation. We will undoubtedly have in a short time the regulation of a superior justice, and of a Sovereign Court on this article. And right now I see a paralytic woman, who is a neighbour and friend of the one who was healed by this operation, who is resolved to present her request to the Magistrates, asking them to be allowed to give her the transfusion, which I have refused to order until now.

Besides, if ever the Faculty of Medicine of Paris assembles on this subject, I do not believe that it acts with so much haste that some individuals are persuaded: and as it is a thing which depends on experience more than on reasoning, it is in the honour of this Faculty not to censor an operation in the time that it is established in all the other universities. And for the parliament I do not see that those who compose it are in the resolution to give any harm to this operation, unless the experiences that [- -] the practice; nonetheless, these medicines not having ceased to follow under

another name, the effects were so beneficial, and the healing, among others, of our great Monarch was so famous, that the same Faculty of Paris was forced two years ago to approve by a decree what it had previously forbidden, and even asked for another arrest to allow it to be used.

This one example alone will prevent it from going so quickly to support it on such occasions. Besides that, the time in which we are now seems much more favourable for new discoveries than it was a hundred years ago. His Majesty, all occupied as he is in the government of his State, and in his Triumphs and Victories, does not fail to make appear a very special protection for men of letters; and in the time that he sends by everyone rewards and gratuities to those who cultivate the sciences; I do not believe that in his State the magistrates are in the resolution to condemn people who have no other crime, may they devote all their vigils to their particular interests about progress and the advancement of new discoveries. I will let you know exactly what will be the outcome, and yet believe me all the time.

SIR

Your very humble and very affectionate servant

J Denis

From Paris, this 15 May 1668