

THE *DE ARTE GYMNASTICA* OF MERCURIALE

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The first complete text on the subject of exercise in relation to health and medicine was published in 1569 by a great Italian physician, Gerolamo Mercuriale (1530-1606), usually known by his Latinized name, Hieronymus Mercurialis. Mercuriale was distinguished by a comprehensive scholarship that was a feature of the Renaissance period in which he lived. He was a prolific writer, and produced a number of famous books in addition to his masterpiece on gymnastics. Among these

appear the first systematic work on skin diseases, *De morbis cutaneis* (1572) and an early text on the illnesses of children, *De morbis puerorum* (1583)

The first edition of *De Arte*, which is in Latin, was published at Venice in 1569. It was written at Rome while Mercuriale was a member of the staff of Cardinal Alexander Farnese, to whom this edition is dedicated. The second edition, illustrated and dedicated to the Emperor Maximilian, appeared at Venice (1573) and Paris



FIGURE I Engraved title of the Amsterdam (1672) edition of *De Arte Gymnastica*
A physician advocates exercise for his inert, adipose patient

(1577), and subsequent editions were published in 1587, 1601 and 1672 (Figure 1), and an Italian translation in 1856.

The work is introduced by a review of the great body of ancient knowledge of the subject, gathered from older writers, both literary and medical. In ancient Greece physical culture occupied an important place in the education and everyday life of all citizens. A highly organized system was developed for the training of youths, military training, and preparation for the national festivals and great games. Gymnasia or physical culture schools flourished in all Greek towns, and were community and intellectual centres. The value of exercise was appreciated both by the State and by individuals, and physicians were aware of its use in the prevention as well as the treatment of ailments. Though it did not achieve such wide application in ancient Rome, physical exercise was applied in military and athletic training.

After describing the physical training and gymnasia of the ancients, Mercuriale systematically indicates the value of exercise in the prevention of illness, the preservation of health, the development of bodily function, and the treatment of affections. The art, he writes, lies in the ability to foresee the effects of exercise, and to apply it in suitable form for both hygienic and curative purposes. His book was not written only for doctors, for on the title page of the first edition he states that it was intended also for students of archæology and for those concerned with the maintenance of good health.

Mercuriale divides exercise into three sections—legitimate, which is regular exercise, and includes its medical use; military; and athletic or dangerous. He deals at

length with the types of medical or hygienic exercise, including dancing, ball games, wrestling, boxing, walking, running, jumping, discus and dumb-bells, throwing, postural exercises, breathing exercises, singing, riding, swimming, fishing and hunting. Each of these is described, together with its effects and its preventive, hygienic and curative indications. Special considerations of age, diet, season and time for exercise are discussed, as well as gymnastic apparatus and training places. He deals also with possible evil effects of exercise, baths and massage. The work is enriched by its author's wide scholarship and by his great knowledge of the medicine of his time.

A complete English translation of *De Arte* is not known. A large part was quoted in *Positions Necessarie for the Training up of Children* (1581), an Elizabethan educational work by Richard Mulcaster, the first headmaster of Merchant Taylors' School. This important book was reprinted in 1888. J. W. F. Blundell included the Mercuriale text in his work *The Muscles and their Story* (1864), but interspersed this with other material, so that its identity is lost. Though a full modern translation would have limited interest, *De Arte* retains its importance, both as the pioneer work on its subject and as an unexcelled source of ancient and Renaissance opinion on physical exercise.

REFERENCES.

- BLUNDELL, J W F (1864) *The Muscles and their Story, from the Earliest Times*, London
- MULCASTER, R (1581) *Positions Wherein Those Primitive Circumstances be Examined, which are Necessarie for the Training up of Children*, London. Reprinted with appendix by R H Quick, London, 1888