**Johnson on Pandemicks[[1]](#endnote-1)**

It was a principle among the ancients, that acute diseases are from Heaven, and chronical from ourselves; the dart of death, indeed, falls from Heaven, but we poison it by our own misconduct. To die; is the fate of man but to die with lingering anguish is generally his folly.

Johnson, The Morning Chronicle, December 12, 1781 (Quoted as a footnote in Boswell’s *Life* for Monday 3 June, 1782)

In Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary, what understanding do we see about infectious diseases?

The dictionary was first published in April 1755. England had suffered several periods of plague: the Black Death of 1346-1353, Plagues during the time of Shakespeare (around his birth 1563 and again in 1603) and the Great Plague of 1665-1666 (in the reign of Charles II). Johnson would have known about these both through historical records and, in the case of the Great Plague, the work of Daniel Defoe, one of his favourite writers, in his *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722).

Johnson gives three meanings for epidemick:

1. That which falls upon great numbers of people as a plague
2. Generally prevailing; affecting great numbers
3. General; universal

The word ‘virus’ does not appear in Johnson’s dictionary although the OED records its use in a reference in 1702 to Cleopatra ‘pouring the virus of an Asp into a wound in her Arm’. In Classical Latin it could refer to slime, poison or offensive smell[[2]](#endnote-2). He does include *Virulent* (adj) and *Virulency* (noun) with the primary meaning being metaphorical. His example: “Disputes in religion are managed with virulency and bitterness.”

*Infection* does occur: Considering medical knowledge at that time Johnson’s definition is actually very precise:

*Infection is that manner of communicating a disease by some effluvia, or particles which fly from distempered bodies, and mixing with the juices of others, occasion the same disorders as in the bodies they came from.*

Similarly, Johnson refers to **Contagion** as ‘The emission from body to body by which diseases are communicated’

Johnson devotes about half a column to ***Plague*** and its variants. His first definition is ‘Pestilence; a disease eminently contagious and destructive’. His quotation to support this is from Shakespeare’s where Lear is addressing Goneril (although ‘boil’ in this First Edition is printed as ‘bile’, a clear misprint or copy error.:

… Thou art a boil

A plague sore or imboss’d carbuncle

In my corrupted blood. *King Lear* (II, iv 226-7)

And what about *Bubonic*? “Bubonic Plague’ is one of three types of plagues. It received its name from swellings in the glands, while the two other types are Septicaemic (in the blood) and Pneumonic (in the lungs). Johnson’s Dictionary has Bubo, defined as ‘That part of the groin from the bending of the thigh to the scrotum; and therefore all tumours in that part are called *buboes*.’[[3]](#endnote-3) His supporting quote is from Wiseman’s Surgery: ‘I suppurated after the manner of a bubo, opened it, and endeavoured detersion.” Johnson tells us that “Detersion” comes from the Latin detergo[[4]](#endnote-4). This was applied to cleaning out wounds rather than being something used to wash dishes.

Two further comments can be made on Johnson’s definition of *Bubo*. The first is that Buboes could appear in any gland in the body eg. under the armpits[[5]](#endnote-5). The second comment is in relation to etymology. Johnson says *Bubo* comes through Latin from the Greek *boubon* βυβών*.* InLewis & Short, *A Latin Dictionary* *Bubo* is defined as *‘*horned owl with cry of ill omen’*.* It occurs once only in Virgil *Aeneid IV 462 carmine bubo –* with ill-boding song*. rana =* frog, *bufo* = toad[[6]](#endnote-6). Modern dictionaries refer to the origin of words like bubo as *Late Latin*. During the early Medieval period when Latin was the *lingua franca* of European scholarship, Greek terms that did not have a Classical Latin equivalent, such as those from the Greek sciences, were then ‘Latinised’ directly. *Epidemic* was another word that went direct from Greek into Late Latin (which also explains why Johnson ends it with a ‘ck’)

1. The first version of this article had some errors as regards dates and translations. Thanks to all those who commented on this and especially to Dr Josephine Wiseman who has supplied her knowledge of medicine and Latin. All the following footnotes are based on her comments [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Lewis & Short, *A Latin Dictionary* gives *virus* from Gk ἰών and Sanskrit *visham* *–* a slimy liquid [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The most common swelling in the groin would be what we call a *hernia* for which Johnson gives *bubonocele*. Johnson himself had swelling of the glands in his neck as a result of tuberculous infection, known as *scrofula* or *the king’s evil*. His use of *Pandemick* refers to consumption, now known as tuberculosis. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Lewis & Short: *detergo* or *detergeo* to cleanse by wiping [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. And also on the skin particularly with disfigurement of the face [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. This information also comes from Dr Wiseman [↑](#endnote-ref-6)