

## LETTER

### Alexander Pope (1688-1744): his spinal deformity and his doctors

*To the Editor:*

O.P. Sharma's interesting account of Alexander Pope's spinal deformity [1] comments on the doctors who attended him, but, despite their eminence, none of them appears to have contributed any ideas or practical advice about how to assess or treat his condition. They may however have been aware of the remarkably modern views of a French physician, PETIT [2], who published a Thesis in France in 1723 which was translated into English in 1726. In this account he attributes breathlessness to the distortion of the spine which alters the disposition of the ribs and respiratory muscles, and to the smallness of the lungs. PETIT [2] also commented that the force of the heart was increased and that there was an obstruction in the capillary vessels of the substance of the lungs. This corresponds to the modern idea that it is the restriction of the pulmonary microcirculation, due to the reduction in lung volume and to hypoxic vasoconstriction, that contributes to right heart failure. PETIT [2] also mentioned the "heaviness and ill quality" of the blood that has its equivalents in the

polycythaemia that arises because of increased erythropoietin production in response to hypoxia.

The physiological explanations of the cardiorespiratory consequences of scoliosis by PETIT [2] were remarkably in advance of others who attempted to explain the effects of spinal deformity [3] and gave Alexander Pope's doctors the basis on which they could have formulated an approach to the treatment of his problems.

#### **J.M. Shneerson**

Respiratory support and sleep centre, Papworth Hospital, Papworth Everard, Cambridge, CB3 8RE, UK. Fax: 44 1480831315.

#### **References**

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2. Petit J-L. A treatise of the diseases of the bones; containing an exact and complete account of the nature, signs, causes, and cures thereof, in all their various kinds. London, UK, T Woodward, 1726; pp. 480–482.
3. Shneerson JM. The development of ideas on the cardiac and respiratory complications of spinal deformities. *Medical History* 1977; 21: 397–410.