

## NOTABLE NOTES

**Saint Anthony's Fire**

Victor Asensi, MD, PhD; Jose Maria Asensi, MD, PhD

Skin infections were extremely frequent throughout the ages until the introduction of antibiotics and even now are common among elderly individuals, especially in those with diabetes and chronic venous insufficiency. The combination of poor hygienic conditions, infrequent changes of clothing, very rare hand-washing, and overcrowded living facilities made skin infections rampant in previous centuries.<sup>1</sup> Prior to antibiotics, only skin cleaning and cool dressing were used to treat these infections, with very poor results.

Thus, it was common to ask for Divine assistance to get rid of the infection. In Catholic countries, a prayer to St Anthony was made by the common folk to obtain a cure for acute skin infections. St Anthony (AD 251-356), was an Egyptian monk known as strict monastic reformer and miraculous healer.<sup>2</sup> St Anthony helped cure people of various skin diseases with pork fat, which reduced inflammation and itching. This was picked up by religious artists, who included images of pigs with St Anthony. "St Anthony's fire" is the name given to streptococcal erysipelas in many European countries, and in the United States to this day. Erysipelas killed saints, popes, kings, soldiers, and writers alike throughout history and well into the 20th century. Famous casualties of erysipelas were St John of the Cross (died 1591), Pope Gregory XVI (died 1846), Queen Anne (died 1714), Princess Amelia of Great Britain (died 1810), Queen Christine of Sweden (died 1679), King Frederick VII of Denmark (died 1873), Scottish nobleman Archibald Douglas, Sixth Earl of Angus (died 1557), Dutch admiral Michiel de Ruyter (died 1676), English writer John Stuart Mill (died 1873), and archaeologist George Herbert, Fifth Earl of Carnarvon (died 1923). The German composer Richard Wagner was cured of erysipelas, although he died in 1883 of a heart attack.

In the painting *Temptation of Saint Anthony*, by Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo (1480-1548), an Italian Renaissance painter (Figure), St Anthony

is shown running from hell to the safety of the desert, away from devilish temptations represented as grotesque figures painted in the manner of Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516). Bosch made the temptations of St Anthony one of his favorite subjects. During the 16th century the plague ravaged Italy, especially in Venice, where Savoldo lived. Many prayers were made in the Venetian churches and privately to St Anthony to prevent plague contagion and to obtain a cure. Although the microbiological etiology of the bubonic plague was *Yersinia pestis* and not *Streptococcus pyogenes*, the agent of the erysipelas, the plague produced enlarged ulcerated groin, axillary, or neck lymph nodes and severe skin involvement.<sup>3</sup> So, plague with acute skin involvement was also a type of St Anthony's fire.

The red flames and suffocating temperature of hell in Savoldo's painting might be his subconscious interpretation of the hot, bright-red erythema, and high fever associated with St Anthony's fire or erysipelas.

**Author Affiliations:** Infectious Diseases Unit, Hospital Universitario Central de Asturias, Oviedo University School of Medicine, Oviedo, Asturias, Spain (V. Asensi); Neurology Service, Cabueñes Hospital, Gijón, Asturias, Spain (J. M. Asensi).

**Corresponding Author:** Victor Asensi, MD, PhD, Infectious Diseases Unit, Hospital Universitario Central de Asturias, Oviedo University School of Medicine, Avenida de Roma s/n, 33011 Oviedo, Spain (vasensia@gmail.com).

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Figure. *Temptation of Saint Anthony*, by Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo



Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo (1480-1548). *Temptation of Saint Anthony*, circa 1515-1520. Oil on panel, 69.5 × 119.4 cm. Courtesy of Timken Museum of Art, Putnam Foundation Collection, San Diego, California.