

# Benjamin Franklin and the Debunking of Mesmerism

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**Introduction:** In 1784, Benjamin Franklin headed a Royal Commission in France to investigate animal magnetism and its then celebrated practitioner, Franz Anton Mesmer. Mesmer believed that a universal magnetic fluid flowed through every being on earth. Illness was caused by blockage or imbalance in the fluid's flow. Mesmer claimed he could manipulate the fluid to restore balance and health to the body. Our aim was to determine Franklin's role in the Commission and his use of scientific principles to question the validity of a popular medical regimen.

**Sources and Methods:** We used contemporary, primary literature pertaining to Franklin, Mesmer, animal magnetism, and mesmerism during the years 1778 to 1785 in Paris, France; archives of the National Library of France; and the Benjamin Franklin archives of the Library of Congress, USA.

**Results:** Franklin and his colleagues conducted placebo-controlled, 'blinded', sham and real experiments on themselves and patient volunteers. The investigators concluded that any positive effect from Mesmer and 'mesmerism' was due to the power of suggestion rather than the effect of any physical fluid or its manipulation. Franklin condemned mesmerism in public fearing its practice could lead to quackery but privately he saw no harm if it kept patients away from more dangerous medications.

**Conclusions:** The Royal Commission's report condemned mesmerism on scientific and moral grounds, but Franklin took a more nuanced view that psychological factors could favorably influence health. In fact, mesmerism, in some form called by other names, thrives today.

**Keywords:** Benjamin Franklin, Anton Mesmer, mesmerism, medical fraud, charlatanism, placebo-controlled trials



On August 11, 1784, a Royal Commission ordained by Louis XVI of France published the findings of its investigation of animal magnetism and mesmerism.(1,2) The members consisted of eight eminent physicians and scientists chosen from the Paris Faculty of Medicine and the Royal Academy of Sciences, headed by America's ambassador to France, Benjamin Franklin (Figure 1). The Commission was tasked specifically to determine the truth behind the supposedly miraculous medical cures claimed by the most celebrated practitioner, and namesake, of animal magnetism, Franz Anton Mesmer (Figure 1).

Mesmer believed that an invisible magnetic fluid emanated from the stars and planets and permeated all elements on earth, especially living organisms, to maintain balance and harmony in the body. Mesmer called his sensational new discovery 'animal magnetism'. (3) All illness, Mesmer conjectured, resulted from the fluid's imbalance or from the fluid's faulty distribution.

By manipulating a patient's magnetic fluid with an iron wand, or even his own hands, Mesmer claimed he could restore the fluid's equilibrium, thereby alleviating any number of contemporary medical conditions including rheumatism, headaches, scrofula, ague, gout, asthma, blindness, epilepsy, tumors, and even paralysis. Mesmer's idea of an 'invisible fluid' investing all objects may have been influenced by similar Age of Enlightenment discoveries including Newton's theories of gravitational forces, Franklin's theories of electricity, Lavoisier's measurements of 'energy' as a 'calorie', and the invisible hydrogen gases used by Jacques Charles in his pioneering balloon flight in and around Paris. (4) Franklin was colonial America's ambassador to France and his role in securing French support of the Continental Armies was critical to America's winning the Revolutionary War. Franklin was a polymath, a creative genius who applied scientific reasoning and empiricism in understanding electricity, and inventor of musical instruments, bifocals, and furniture, and

developed urinary catheters. He himself suffered from bladder stones but only accepted treatments that he felt were supported by sound scientific principles. It is likely that he accepted with eagerness, therefore, to serve on a Royal Commission that was to examine the scientific validity of Mesmer's claims. Our objective was to determine Franklin's role in the Commission and whether it served as a prototype for the methodical evaluation required of today's most popular medical and urologic regimens.

## SOURCES AND METHODS

Books, journals, papers, monographs, essays, and letters, published in the English and French literature relating to Franklin, Mesmer, mesmerism, the Report of the Commissioners charged by the King with Examination of Animal Magnetism, Yale University Sterling Memorial Library; the Bakkan Museum and Library, Minneapolis, Minnesota; the National Library of France ([www.gallica.fr](http://www.gallica.fr)); and the Library of Congress ([www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov)).<sup>(5,6)</sup>

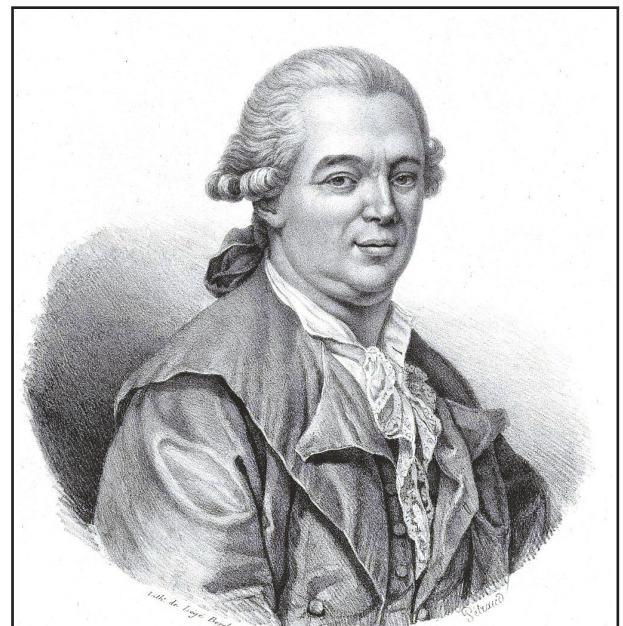
## RESULTS

### Franklin and Mesmer

In the late 1700s, Benjamin Franklin was in his 70s and Mesmer in his 40s. Franklin was taken out of school

at age 10 and self-educated; Mesmer was a graduate of the prestigious medical schools in Vienna and was known to be charismatic and beguilingly intelligent. Mesmer arrived in Paris in February 1778 and established a large and lucrative practice, taking care of the medical problems of Paris' wealthy elite. Mesmer and his methods became so popular, he was shunned by the physician establishment.<sup>(7)</sup> Established doctors not only doubted the science behind his methods but saw Mesmer's success as a threat to their income. Skepticism abounded. Shortly after Mesmer's arrival, Franklin received a letter from a good friend, in Vienna, who wrote:

*"I hear the Vienna conjuror Dr. Mesmer is at Paris, that he has been presented to the Royal Academy, that he still pretends a magnetical effluvium streams from his finger and enters the body of any person without being obstructed by walls or any other obstacles, and that such stuff, too insipid for to get belief by any old woman, is believed by your friend, Mr. (Jean Baptiste) LeRoy (President of the Academy of Sciences was later a member of the Commission)."*<sup>(8)</sup>



**Figure 1.** (Left) Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) by the French portraitist Joseph Duplessis (1725-1802), 1778, which later appeared on the US \$100 bill (Public Domain). (Right) Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), lithograph by the 18th century master Pétraud, (Bordeux Municipal Library, France)





**Figure 2.** Left. "The Baquet of Monsieur Mesmer or Faithful Representation of the Operations of Animal Magnetism" (artist unknown, from the De Vinck Collection, National Library of France (Public Domain)); Right. Last remaining actual 'tub' of Mesmer now on display at the Museum of the History of Pharmacy, Lyon France. (Courtesy, Musée d'Histoire de la médecine et de la Pharmacie, Lyon, France)

Franklin first met Mesmer in 1779. Accompanied by a close lady friend, who was also an accomplished musician, Franklin visited Mesmer to watch him play the glass 'armonica' (an instrument invented by Franklin himself and used by Mesmer during his magnetic seances). However, Mesmer was more interested expounding on his theories of animal magnetism than playing the armonica. In late 1779, Mesmer invited Franklin to meet and observe him perform cures so that Franklin could "discover for himself the advantages of animal magnetism."<sup>(8)</sup> Franklin did not record whether he observed Mesmer work with patients, but after hearing testimony of patients who believed they were relieved of their aches and pains, or cured of their ills, he began to see an element of deception in Mesmer's operations.<sup>(6,9)</sup> Franklin felt that nature, 'left to her own devices', relieved many ills without any human intervention and wryly suspected that an "unintended boost to nature lay at the root of Mesmer's success."<sup>(6)</sup>

Franklin's views and skepticism about mesmerism emerged in a letter dated March 19, 1784, to a colleague who had requested Franklin's opinion of the value of animal magnetism:

*"As to the animal magnetism, so much talked of, I am totally unacquainted with it, and I must doubt its existence till I can see or feel some effect of it.*

*None of the cures said to be performed by it have fallen under my observation, and there being so many disorders which cure themselves, and such a disposition in mankind to deceive themselves and one another on these occasions, and living long has given me so frequent opportunities of seeing certain remedies cried up as curing everything, and yet soon after totally laid aside as useless, I cannot but fear that the expectation of great advantage from this new method of treating diseases will prove a delusion. That delusion may, however, and in some cases, be of use while it lasts. There are in every great, rich city, a number of persons, who are never in health, because they are fond of medicines, and always taking them whereby they derange the natural functions, hurt their constitution. If these people can be persuaded to forbear their drugs, in expectation of being cured by only the physician's finger, or an iron rod pointing at them, they may possibly find good effects, though they mistake the cause."<sup>(10)</sup>*

This letter is quoted in its entirety to illustrate that Franklin, although skeptical, was keeping an open mind, even admitting that animal magnetism may do some good, if for no other reason, than keeping patients away from existing malicious remedies (eg., bloodletting,



**Figure 3.** “The Potager of the Hôtel de Valentinois” showing the gardens of the palatial home where Franklin lived during his ‘French period’, in the Parisian suburb of Passy. It was in the home where the Commission did most of its work on animal magnetism and, in the gardens themselves, a careful analysis and debunking of ‘natural magnetism’ espoused by Mesmer and Desnos (by Alexis-Nicolas Pérignon (1726-1802), c1770, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, Public Domain)

mercurials, etc.).

### The Commission and its Establishment by the King

Franklin and the commissioners began their investigation in March 1784 using systematic methods of public observation, self-study, case by case analysis, and hypothesis testing.<sup>(11)</sup> They knew they could not see the ‘invisible fluid’ but they could measure its effects. They sought to test two variables influencing the effects of animal magnetism, whether patients were told (or aware) they were being treated, and whether they really were treated. Mesmer preferred to treat his subjects in a group setting, called ‘magnetic seances’. Patrons sat around a large wooden tub called a ‘baquet’ that had been filled with ‘magnetized’ water, shards of glass, and iron fillings (Figure 2). The patients were asked to grasp iron rods protruding through the lid of the tub to conduct the magnetic flux through their bodies. Mesmer walked among his patients, and using his finger and hands, gently probed sensitive areas on their bodies – face, breast, stomach, lower abdomen, inner thighs, even the ovary (most patients were women). Many reacted with sighs, drowsiness, hysterical laughter, twitching of limbs or ecstatic shrieks and, after an hour or two of such administrations, the subjects would faint, fall into a trance, or succumb to violent convulsions, called a ‘crisis’. Each ‘crisis’ was believed to be necessary to break the blockage of the fluid and restore magnetic harmony in

affected parts of the body. When patients recovered, they professed to be relieved of their ailments.

### The Commission Methods

The commissioners noted that when one patient fell into a crisis, others followed within several minutes. To avoid collective bias of this crowd effect, the Commission decided to conduct further experiments on themselves and individual patients in private, many held at Franklin’s residence, Hôtel de Valentinois in Passy, a suburban area of Paris (Figure 3). Mesmer refused to cooperate but his chief disciple, Charles Deslon, agreed to demonstrate Mesmer’s treatments at the Franklin residence.

Franklin set out to test the ‘magnetized’ water in the tub with an ‘electrometer’ but no magnetic activity was detected. Franklin allowed himself to be ‘magnetized’ over three consecutive days but experienced no effects, nor relief of his gout, or bladder stone ailments. The investigation then proceeded to test whether the ‘crises’ that mesmerists claimed to induce were caused by the psychological power of suggestion (referred to as ‘imagination’) versus the physical action of an invisible fluid. In a series of experiments designed and conducted by Antoine Lavoisier and Franklin, Deslon was asked to magnetize subjects (who were often blindfolded) without their knowledge (“magnetism without imagination”) or tell patients they were being magnetized by Deslon when they were not (“imagination without magnetism”).





individuals after witnessing a crisis in others). The last paragraph of the report concluded:

*"Therefore, having demonstrated by decisive experiments that the imagination without the magnetism produces convulsions, and that the magnetism without the imagination produces nothing, [we] have concluded with a unanimous voice...the existence of the fluid is absolutely destitute of proof, and that the fluid, having no existence, can consequently have no use."*(1)

They went even further to claim that animal magnetism was dangerous, concluding "when the imagination produces convulsions, the means it employs are violent, and such means are almost always destructive...The compressions and the repeated action of the imagination employed in producing the crisis may be hurtful ...and cannot fail in the end of producing the most pernicious effects."(2) The Commission also submitted a second report privately to the King, detailing the salacious nature of animal magnetism and condemning it on moral grounds as a threat to women (Figure 4).(5)

### **Effects of the Report in Popular Culture**

Reaction to mesmerism changed from one of enthusiastic support to one of scorn, depicted in an engraving of the time, 'Le Magnetisme devoile' (Figure 4). Abbe Faria, an Indo-Portuguese monk and contemporary of Mesmer, wrote "nothing comes from the magnetizer, everything comes from the subject and take place in his imagination."(12)

All of this posed a dilemma for Franklin. He recognized privately that belief and hope (even misguided) was a powerful remedy for some patients but realized that publicly endorsing the curative effects of a technique that had no basis in science could lead to medical quackery.(9)

### **Mesmerism in history and modern times**

The Franklin Report put an end to Mesmer (he died in obscurity in 1815), but not to mesmerism. In a letter to his grandson, Franklin wrote, "The Mesmer Report is publish'd and makes a great deal of Talk....Some think it will put an end to mesmerism. But there is a wonderful deal of Credulity in the World, and Deceptions as absurd have supported themselves for the Ages."(6)

In fact, mesmerism, or something like it, had been practiced long before Mesmer. The noted physician, Michel-Augustin Thouret, remarked that many faith

healers had accomplished cures resembling Mesmer's, mentioning Paracelsus and the notorious Valentine Greatrakes (the 'Irish stroker'), as examples from the 17th century. Even the term 'animal magnetism' had been coined and "now, as was then, an old falsehood". (13) Just recently, a mesmerism-like practice returned in the form of 'therapeutic touch (TT)', rooted in mysticism but alleged to have a scientific basis, that involves no actual touching. Practitioners wave their hands above the skin, allegedly realigning patients' energy fields. Restoring energy balance allows the patient's body to heal itself. In 1998, TT was debunked when 21 experienced practitioners were unable to detect any 'human-energy field' around subjects in repeated blinded experiments.(14) Mesmerism is still being taught by a certain Marco Paret in Nice, France at the so-called International Institute for Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), Hypnosis, and Communication. (15) Paret trademarked the word "Mesmerismus" to mean "connecting the forces of nature to one's work and influence" and that "having these forces available, in creating the plan of his life, everyone can aim for the top." Mesmer is currently being resurrected as a precursor to hypnosis and Freund's psychotherapy.

### **DISCUSSION**

Frankling had been stricken with bladder stones and gout at the time of the Commission's work and he was largely confined to his Passy residence.(16) In the past, Franklin was regarded only as a titular head of the Commission, who approved and signed the report but had little to do with the actual investigation. On the contrary, we found that Franklin was familiar with Mesmer and mesmerism long before the Commission was formed, that many experiments took place in Franklin's presence in Passy and his garden, and that he was involved much more in the concepts and conduct of the experiments than previously thought.(9)

The Commission was revolutionary in the way it used scientific methods we would recognize today in the objective evaluation of even the most popular medical remedies. In their five months of work, the commissioners witnessed public magnetism of patients and conducted private sham and genuine experiments with a variety of individuals, where both the patient and mesmerist were literally blindfolded and 'blinded' to the treatment and its visible effects (i.e. double-blind, placebo-controlled clinical trials). The blinded nature of the placebo-controlled work (patients did not always know when the magnetic operation was being performed) marks the Commission's most innovative



contribution to science. The work also established the influence of belief on the unwitting practitioner as many 'mesmerists' like Deslon were not 'frauds' *per se* but misguided believers in their methods.

The Franklin Commission, and later in what became known as the 'Franklin Report', was also pioneering for its sharply worded and unambiguous terms declaring animal magnetism a farce, Mesmer a charlatan, and that Mesmer was nothing more than a master of deceit. The late paleontologist Steven Jay Gould (1941-2002) wrote that the report "should be rescued from its obscurity, translated into all languages, and reprinted by organizations dedicated to the unmasking of quackery and the defense of rational thought."(17) Thomas Jefferson also felt the Commission's report was irrefutable, writing in 1790 that "the animal magnetism, too, of the maniac Mesmer...received its death-wound from his hand, in conjunction with his brethren of the learned committee appointed to unveil the compound of fraud and folly."(18)

The major conclusion of the Commission's report was that touch, imagination, and imitation were the true causes of the effects of animal magnetism, and imagination was the principle of the three causes (the power of psychological suggestion to influence behavior in excitable and sensitive individuals). Although this was the collective view, it was not entirely Franklin's private view, and his personal observations on the powerful therapeutic impact of non-specific treatment factors remain compelling.(19,20) Indeed, Franklin personally arrived at a more nuanced denouement of mesmerism than the harsh sentence published in the 'Report.'(6) He came to realize that the exercise of reason was a harder sell than the supernatural, and persistence of delusion and the power of charisma was a lucrative and alluring business. He did not doubt the sincerity of patients' belief in magnetism or the physical responses he observed to Deslon's manipulations. Some patients, he concluded, may indeed have felt better after even undergoing bogus treatments. Franklin came to balance the need for scientific acumen with an appreciation of the psychological factors that can contribute both to the severity and relief of illness.

A perplexing question is why such snake-oil quackery and claims of mysterious medical cures continue to thrive today without any scientific basis. In his report, Franklin speculates on an answer for our times:

*"Perhaps the history of the errors of mankind, all things considered, is more valuable and interesting than that of their discoveries. Truth is uniform and*

*narrow; it constantly exists, and does not seem to require so much an active energy, as a passive aptitude of soul in order to encounter it. But error is endlessly diversified; it has no reality, but is the pure and simple creation of the mind that invents it. In this field the soul has room enough to expand herself, to display all her boundless faculties, and all her beautiful and interesting extravagancies and absurdities."*(10,21)

## CONCLUSIONS

Franklin had an active and major role in the Commission which used double blinded, placebo-controlled trials to reveal the fraud of mesmerism. The full Franklin report should be read by all, especially urologists, who must weigh often uncontrolled and subjective benefits claimed by technology-driven new devices and treatments.(1,2)

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