fatal cases occurred in houses supplied by the Southwark and Vauxhall Company, only 14 in that of the Lambeth Company’s houses, and the remainder in houses that got their water from pump wells or direct from the river. Remember, this was in districts where houses standing next to each other very often had a different water supply.”

“Pure reason!” ejaculated the Magistrate. “It will be too much for them. Ha! Ha!” If anything was destined to distract the assembly from an objective consideration of rival arguments it was this strange, almost mad, outburst from the Magistrate. Dr McNab continued, however: “During the epidemic as a whole which lasted ten weeks there were 2443 deaths in houses supplied by Southwark and Vauxhall as against 313 in those supplied by the Lambeth Company. Admittedly the former supplied twice as many houses as the latter . . . but if the fatal cases of cholera during the entire epidemic are taken in proportion to the houses supplied, it will be seen that there were 610 deaths out of 10000 houses supplied by the Southwark and Vauxhall Company, whereas there were only 119 out of 10000 supplied by the Lambeth Company. I challenge Dr Dunstaple to deny in the face of this evidence that cholera is not spread by drinking water!”

The effect of Dr McNab’s arguments was by no means as overwhelming as might be supposed; with the best will in the world and in ideal circumstances it is next to impossible to escape cerebral indigestion as someone quotes comparative figures as fluently as Dr McNab had just been doing. The audience, their minds gone blank, stared craftily at Dr McNab wondering whether this was a conjuring trick in which he took advantage of their stupidity. Very likely it was. The audience, too, was painfully hungry and yet in the presence of food which was not apparently destined for their stomachs; this made them feel weak and peevish. The heat, too, was atrocious; the air in the hall was stagnant and the audience stinking. Every time you took a breath of that foul air you could not help imagining the cholera poison gnawing at your lungs. Even Fleury, who was perfectly conscious of the force of McNab’s arguments, nevertheless gave a visceral assent to those of Dr Dunstaple.

What would have happened if Dr Dunstaple had replied to Dr McNab’s challenge it is hard to say. He had taken a seat on the stairs while McNab was speaking. As he finished, however, he sprang to his feet, his face working with rage, his complexion tinged with lavender. He opened his mouth to speak but his words were drowned by a volley of musket fire nearby and the crash of a round shot which brought down a shower of plaster on the heads of his audience.

“Stand to arms!” came a cry from outside, and immediately everyone began to disperse in pandemonium (and more than one tin of food was accidentally grabbed up in the confusion). The Doctor was left to wave his arms and shout; he could not be heard above the din. However, he had one final argument, more crushing than any he had yet delivered, and for this he needed no words. From his alpaca coat he whipped a medicine bottle of colourless fluid, flourished it significantly at Dr McNab and drank it all off. What was in the bottle that he had thus publicly drained to the last drop? The Doctor himself did not say. Yet it did not require much imagination to see that it could only be one thing: the so-called “rice-water” fluid from a cholera patient, which Dr McNab claimed was so deadly. Against this argument Dr McNab’s tiresome statistics could not hope to compete.”

Farrell attributed two sets of figures to John Snow in the excerpts reprinted above from The Siege of Krishnapur.¹ ‘During the epidemic of 1854 Dr Snow uncovered the following facts . . . out of 134 deaths from cholera during the first four weeks, 115 of the fatal cases occurred in houses supplied by the Southwark and Vauxhall Company, only 14 in that of the Lambeth Company’s houses, and the remainder in houses that got their water from pump wells or direct from the river’.

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Postscript: Farrell on Snow
Table 1  Deaths in London by water supply during the cholera epidemic 8th July – 10th November 1854

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Houses supplied</th>
<th>Deaths in first 4 weeks 8th July – 4th Aug</th>
<th>Deaths/10 000 houses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Southwark and Vauxhall Company</td>
<td>20,555</td>
<td>115&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lambeth Company</td>
<td>25,491</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>134 deaths in total</strong>&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Deaths in the 10 weeks 26th Aug – 10th Nov

| Southwark and Vauxhall Company | 40,046 | 2443 | 610 |
| Lambeth Company | 26,107 | 313 | 119 |

<sup>a</sup>Figures in bold appear in Farrell’s text
<sup>b</sup>Figures taken from reference 2
<sup>c</sup>Includes other water sources; 2 cases from pump-wells, 1 direct from the river, and 2 cases not ascertained.

‘Dr McNab continued, however: ‘During the epidemic as a whole which lasted ten weeks there were **2443 deaths** in houses supplied by Southwark and Vauxhall as against **313** in those supplied by the Lambeth Company. Admittedly the former supplied twice as many houses as the latter… but if the fatal cases of cholera during the entire epidemic are taken in proportion to the houses supplied, it will be seen that there were **610 deaths out of 10000** houses supplied by the Southwark and Vauxhall Company, whereas there were only **119 out of 10000** supplied by the Lambeth Company.’

Farrell appears to have taken his figures from a paper by Snow in the Medical Times and Gazette of 1855. The only place where Farrell slips up is that he appears to have misread Snow’s introduction to the second set of figures ‘From the 26th of August to the end of the epidemic, a period of ten weeks, **2443 cases** were…..’ as meaning the epidemic as a whole lasted for 10 weeks. Unfortunately for Londoners it was considerably longer. Snow reports on three successive periods of 4 weeks, 3 weeks and 10 weeks; a total of 17 weeks overall, starting on the 8th July 1854. However, the evidence remains the same, indicting the Southwark and Vauxhall Company which drew its water from the river Thames at Battersea Fields where it was contaminated with the sewerage of London and passed it on to its customers largely unfiltered. The Southwark and Vauxhall’s main rival, the Lambeth Company, had moved its source in 1852 further up the river to Thames Ditton out of reach of the city’s sewage. As well as affording its customers a significant degree of protection the water from the Lambeth Company also provided Snow with the evidence he needed to confirm the faecal oral route as the mode of transmission for cholera.

References