

PERINATAL LESSONS FROM THE PAST

Felix Würtz of Basel (1518-75) and clubfeet

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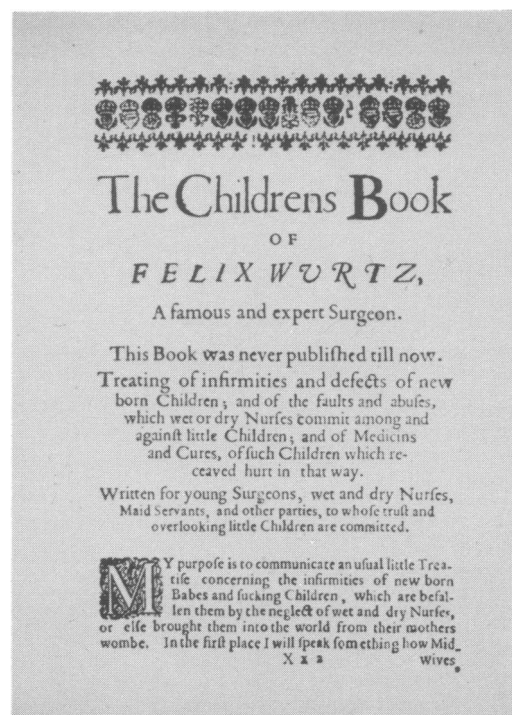
Felix Würtz, the son of a surgeon in Basel, studied in Nuremberg before returning to practice in his home town. His paediatric treatise, first published in 1563,¹ was translated into English in 1656 as *The Childrens Book of Felix Würtz* (figure). It is clearly based on his own experience and is amazingly fresh and free from the prejudices of the past. As he wrote: 'I presume not to write of things which I never had an experience of; those I leave unto wiser men'.

Würtz's book contains a great deal of sound and original advice, for instance, on the choice of midwife or wet nurse, on the importance of discovering why a baby was crying, and on the harm that might be done by tightly swaddling the baby, as was the custom at that time. He also warns of the danger of deformation should the baby be always carried on the same arm, or be made to sit or stand too early and too long. Indeed Würtz was the first author after Hippocrates to give advice on the management of congenital orthopaedic deformities. The following section entitled 'Of crooked and lame children, coming thus into the world' illustrates his practical experience and mastery of the subject. Above all he appreciated the importance of growth in addition to postural correction.

'It hapneth that a child is born with crooked feet, placed and pressed one upon another, and must go on the ancles if they can . . . they usually say that such lame births are caused by frights, strang sights, or by carelessness, which nurses have to answer for. These defects they say are incurable; it agreeth with that saying, no body maketh himself crooked. These idle pratings causeth and lazy people, pretending, if my lame child cannot be cured, why should I be at expences or taking of pains. It is a base and false excuse, because experience proveth it to be otherwise . . .'

'Let no man be neglective if his child be thus crooked, as not to ask counsel about it; though all be not recovered which are in such cases, yet many are cured, if not perfectly, yet may they be mended in some sort; the which I do demonstrate with examples. I have dressed a newborn child, and ordered it with splinters as I thought fitting, whose feet from his mother's womb stood so, that the child stood on the outside ancle, which with splinters I brought to right, and that child went as straight as any other'.

'Therefore observe whether that joint both bow and turn easily to the place where it



The Childrens Book of Felix Würtz (1518-75).

should be, then bind it that way, and cure it. Some joints will easily turn and bow, but that is not enough; binding is for such a joint the better, the growing whereof bringeth forward the cure and not the bowing or setting; the bowing of it is good, but it is not all, but it must be set and laid right also, then the one helps the other, and the growth in time is brought on; though little amendment is seen in a week, moneth, or three moneths, yet a whole years time may produce something, and in time perfectness comes in'.

'No splinter must be too close applyed here, neither must they be bound too hard; if too hard, and the child cryeth out by reason of the pains it feels, then instantly tie it slacker, for such pains would cause great mischief: therefore bind such joints softly and gently, according to the place . . . You are to observe exactly, when there cometh into any joint, pains, redness, smartings, blewishness, or collositie, a swelling or the like symptome, then it is very hurtful and dangerous; for then you have bound it too hard, unbind it presently, the child's welfare lyeth therein, if not his life; . . . at the first you ought to bind it gently, then you may soon perceive whether you are or may proceed further and more hard in it . . .'

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‘When you are to dresse a child’s crooked joint, then take my red plaister, which groweth stiff and hard, sticketh closely, and as you measured your splinters, then take the plaister spread on a cloth, apply it on the splinters, that it may stick thereunto, and cover the splinter well in the inside, then that band holdeth fast; for it keepeth the splinters so fast together, as a saddle holds firmly which is glued together. The over-plus of the plaister, which goeth or runneth beyond the splinters, you cut off and spread the plaister there on the splinters . . . pulled not too hard but gently:

it is better they be bound slack a whole week, than too hard one hour. Then apply your measured splinters, you need but two, and not three, four, or more, which other fractures require. Then bind this joint as it fitteth in the bowing, and let it rest thus bound ten or fourteen daies, as you see occasion . . . if the case be altered and mended, then your splinters and binders must be accordingly altered . . . I have often practiced it, and had good success therein: God be praised forever: Amen’.

1 Würtz F. *Practica der Wundartzney*. Basel, 1563.