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NEWS, OLD NEWS, FAKE NEWS.

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"I eat what I like and suffer thereafter"

Martin Luther (1483 – 1546)

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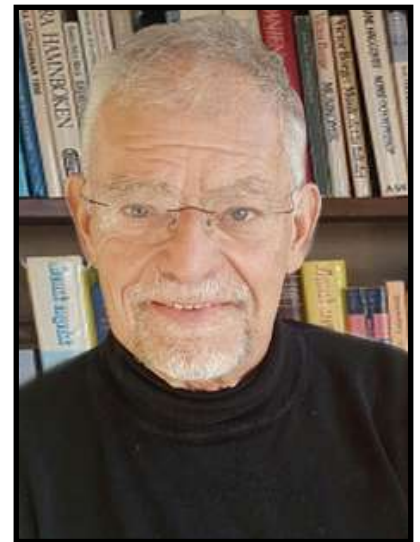
Martin Luther's health has been discussed extensively by psychiatrist and clinicians over the years – he clearly had a complex psychiatric history of neuroticism and, most likely, a manic-depressive condition, while also suffering from a somatic condition.

Luther was born in 1483 in Eisleben in Germany and began his study in Erfurt in 1501. He admitted that he enjoyed the life of a student more than the studies themselves, engaging heavily in eating and drinking and even referred to the University as 'a pub and a brothel'(1) He woke everyday at 4 o'clock for a day filled with 'mechanical learning and tiring spiritual exercises'1. Here, academics taught Luther to be critical towards even the greatest philosophers and to test matters through his own experience. Luther resisted the concept that the Bible was the only tool for spiritual development and believed that common sense would not necessarily lead man to God.

In 1505 Luther was accepted into a monastery, however the early years were not easy as he was ostracized by his fellow monks who forced him to execute undesirable tasks as they despised the academic and learned young man. The University eventually reacted to this treatment of their scholar and had him admitted into proper ranks of the Order. Luther could now begin his career, where he eventually met his academic goals and became a Professor of Theology in 1512. Luther's critical approach to his work resulted in the famous '95 Theses' that he nailed on the church door of Wittenberg in 1517. This endeavor angered the Pope and caused Luther and his wife to live in constant fear of being imprisoned by the papal revenge system.

Despite this threat to his personal safety, Luther was also at risk due to his poor health throughout his life. At the age of only 20 years old, Luther developed a leg ulcer that never healed and it is believed he suffered from angina pectoris from 1527, however it is difficult now to evaluate the severity of his chest pains. Numerous paintings depict Luther becoming increasingly obese over time and it is likely that he suffered from high blood pressure, certainly experiencing continuous headaches and epilepsy or possibly Ménière's disease(1). In 1525 he had his first kidney stone, he suffered from continuous severe constipation, had bleeding haemorrhoids and suffered from insomnia. All of these medical problems began in the early 1520s, which he interpreted as provocations from Satan. Due to the early onset of his health problems, it is surprising that Luther managed to produce 124 publications, including a translation of the entire Bible from Hebrew into German and numerous religious publications.

In 1525, Luther married Katharina von Bora, who had been a nun. She had escaped from a cloister with eleven other nuns. Luther worked hard to find them work or a partner as their families did not want them back. With



him, came the change that a clergyman could be a married man, no longer living a celibate life. During the critical years of conflict with the Pope and the political system, Luther lived a simple life, his marriage was happy and Luther changed his dietary habits for the better. The family was always poor, but Katharina made ends meet by cultivating her garden, caring for a pig sty, and renting out rooms in their home to tenants and students.

From a historical perspective, it is interesting to note the treatment that the doctors at the time recommended for his constipation: Luther was ordered to consume six large spoons of butter daily, which likely promoted his obesity more than cured his haemorrhoids. It is obvious that he did not care too much about the advice he received from the medical profession and stoically concluded that he would be prepared to pay the price for his enjoyment of food. In 1533, Luther had his first attack of gout and began to develop psychiatric symptoms including bitterness, depression and aggression. Of course, we have no data on weight and height from Luther, but we can guess from paintings and his writing that he suffered considerable abdominal obesity, which will also fit with the symptoms suggesting a metabolic syndrome. His death mask also suggests a man with considerable weight problems. With time, he developed a cataract, arthritis and an ear infection, which ruptured one of his tympani. In December 1544, his more severe symptoms of angina pectoris started. It remains an enigma that this man under such demanding conditions could be so academically and theologically productive.

With time Luther's writing and mood became increasingly aggressive and his later texts are extremely antisemitic. Luther had never intended to leave Catholicism; what he disliked was the papal management with the letters of indulgence and the ensuing business, which the popes were involved in. A main reason for the later separation from the Catholic Church was Luther's negative attitude towards the indulgences. These letters promised that any sinner, who could contribute money for the completion of St Peter's Basilica in Rome, would be forgiven. Luther objected, wrote his 95 theses and nailed them on the wall of the castle church door on 31 October 1517, a date which today is regarded as the start of the Protestant Reformation.

Martin Luther worked till the end of his life and he delivered his last sermon only three days before his death. In 1546 on February 17 he woke up in the evening with severe chest pains. He confirmed his religious beliefs to his two companions who were present, had a stroke which made it impossible to speak and died the following day. With his massive medical history and the complete lack of any effective treatment, apart from a strict diet, to which he would not adhere, it is amazing that Martin Luther reached the age of 63.

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