

## Anne of Austria (1601-1666), queen of France: died of breast cancer

G. Androutsos

*Institute of History of Medicine, University Claude Bernard, Lyon, France*

### Summary

*Anne of Austria ("the Spain's infant"), was married to Louis XIII, on October 25th, 1615. She became queen of France and they had two children: Louis (the future Louis XIV) and Philippe, duke of Orleans. Everybody knows that*

*Anne of Austria died of breast cancer. This is a widely known fact, so we are not going to add anything but some details, which are generally ignored.*

**Key words:** Anne of Austria, breast cancer, queen of France

### The important phases of the illness of Anne of Austria

Anne had always had such a good health that it might be inferred that she would have a vigorous and long old age. It was a terrible shock when she became seriously ill on April 10th 1663. Suddenly, the queen mother complained of lassitude on her arms, leg pain, nausea and fever which lasted several days. Her doctors made her bleed several times until a day she passed out, bloodless. Then, they gave her quinine, which stroke fever down but did not have any effect on any other of her symptoms. Finally, they convinced her of taking a strong emetic. Her two children - Philippe d'Orleans and Louis XIV - did not separate from her (Figure 1), indeed, during all her illness [1].

At last, in June 1663, Anne began to get better. Her convalescence lasted a long time and she was not able to get up from bed before August 9th, when she was happy just going to visit the Val-de-Grâce monastery to express her feelings about her recovery [2].

In May 1664, Anne began to feel again pain on her left breast. She had already detected a nodule there, but she did not pay attention and even ignored this new pain. On October 4th, Anne experienced the first symptoms of the disease which would go to take her away. She went to visit the Val-de-Grâce's nuns where she had a faintness that made her go to bed inside the monastery [3]. On October 10th, Anne felt a very painful lump on her breast which caused her some

quite vivid apprehensions: having had the opportunity of perceiving, inside the monastery of Val-de-Grâce, this terrible illness which was devouring her, she did no longer have any illusion about its nature [3, p 198]. In November, the extent of Anne's fatigue and waxy complexion started to notice, but these symptoms were believed to be caused by anxiety and exhaustion [3, p 218].

It was during Anne's retirement in her most loved abbey, in Christmas 1664, when the disease revealed



**Figure 1.** Anne of Austria, 42 years old, with her children Louis and Philippe.

itself with all its violence. Her doctors, who, until then, had prescribed nothing but hemlock plasters - an old remedy of the popular medicine - finally agreed upon their impotency and made come the most important leading experts who could only confirm the same first diagnosis: this was well and good an incurable cancer [4].

At that time, no known treatment existed for breast cancer. Because it was thought that this disease was like the others - a consequence of an unbalance between the fluids of the body - doctors used to prescribe bloodlettings and purges in order to try to reestablish this broken balance. Even though medical literature explained enough about the simple and pure removal of the breast (without anesthesia or asepsia), this was a heroic operation, barely or never practised. Anyway, as regards Anne, nobody dared even to advance the idea. Under those conditions, empiric medicines, ointments and caustic substances for local application were the only things left, and in that field, healers competed with official medicine. As time went along with news about Anne's illness, all sort of people presented at Court with supposedly infallible formulas [3, p 221].

*"A certain lady had promised to cure Anne, but decided to leave the idea,* wrote Gui Patin to his colleague Falconet. *It was also talked about a country town monk and another charlatan who was going to come from Holland..."* [4, letter of 2 January 1665].

Meanwhile, Louis XIV inquired, even in Italy, experts about the matter and medicine. Waiting for an answer, he trusted his mother to his first doctor, Antoine Vallot (1594-1671) [1, p 502].

Among the doctor's papers, we found a copy of his diagnosis, but since this document is not dated, it could be related to the queen's condition in November 1664, or in December, or even later: *"The importance of the queen mother's illness, linked with her old age (she was 63 years old), makes possible a fearful inauspicious event. However, we are not desperate. If the patient still accepts medicine, we will procure her relief and so she will live several more years"* [5].

Treatment consisted of frequent enemas, some bloodlettings from her arm's vein and weekly purges with a concoction, with senna and rhubarb as its active ingredients. Additionally, during the first weeks, Anne had to apply an ointment made of hemlock extract, which allegedly relieved her breast pain. Stating the ineffectiveness of treatment, Séguin, Anne's doctor, advised her to try the one proposed by the Abbot François Gendron, alleged possessor of an infallible medicine for those types of diseases. Gendron promised the queen mother that his remedy - made up of belladonna and burned lime - would make her sick breast strong

as marble and in consequence she would be living as she had never had cancer [3, p 218].

She then coated herself with this mixture until August 1665, but at that time the disease had progressed so much that she was believed dying in two occasions. Feeling surrounding pressure, she decided to dismiss Gendron and trusted her life to someone called Alliot, a doctor from Lorraine, who was famous thanks to a powder named after him [4, p 513].

Doctors had not demonstrated so strong opposition till the time it was said to invite Alliot, but Dean Gui Patin (1602-1672), jealous of prerogatives from the Medical Faculty, did not lose the opportunity to stab this intruder who had just entered the medical fields [6].

The specific remedy of Alliot was based on arsenic; it was a caustic, the effect of which was to mortify tissues, which would be removed progressively [4, p 513]. She was submitted daily to this procedure, from August 1665 to January 1666, and, at least during some time, doctors gave her hopes for some progress, even up to say that after all she probably was not going to die of that cancer [3, pp 261-263]. But if they really believed in that idea, they were completely wrong. In early January 1666, really weakened by the pain and the fever, Anne is convinced of abandoning Alliot and hiring a Milanese who supposedly knew a more effective treatment [3, pp 273-274]. Anyway, Anne did not suffer from the disease so much longer because death surprised her on January 20th 1666.

### Some details about the disease

When she was informed about her doctors' diagnosis she just said: *"What I am going to suffer will be, beyond any doubt, for my health: and I hope to be strong enough to stand it with patience"* [3, p 220]. This was because she had a really clear picture of what her future would be: she had already seen some nuns dying of breast cancer at the Val-de-Grâce hospital. She had even recognized always being terrified just thinking about the possibility of having this disease [3, p 237]. However, while her condition got worse, she had some rebellion impulses: *"Quite often, she said she never thought about having a destiny different from other creatures; that nobody decomposes before death but that God had decided to condemn her to decompose during life"* [3, p 262]. Yet, in general, she took her disease as some kind of penitence, an opportunity to expiate her vanity and self-indulgence: *"God wants to chasten me for having a lot of self-love and for having much loved the beauty of my body"* [3, p 277]. For Anne

had always taken meticulous care of herself, giving an extremely high importance to cleanliness. She was so delicate that she could not tolerate ordinary linens in direct contact with her skin [3, p 284].

On April 20th 1665, the queen decided to follow the Court to Saint Germain and so she leaves in a sedan, by saying that if she was to die, she preferred to die there than in Paris. But once they arrived in Chaillot, she felt that the car shocks during the trip harmed her tremendously; her pain became stronger in Saint Cloud. From that day on, her suffering did not stop again [6].

Thanks to a letter from Gui Patin we know the remedy provided. *“The queen is made bleed in Saint Germain in order to diminish the pain and inflammation of her breast”* [4, letter of April 28th]. In another letter: *“Today, I was informed that the queen is getting worse. We have talked about an important consultation we have to arrange for our queen, to know if we will open the breast to draw the pus and the malignant serosity, which consumes substance day after day. People also talk about a doctor named Châtelain...; he is alleged able to heal these kinds of diseases because he’s got secrets against incurable diseases. If he did not promise anything we would not make him come from so far. These are impostures. Cancer can not be cured and will never be; but the world likes to commit mistakes”* [4, letter of May 22th ].

On May 27th the queen mother felt a strong shivering, while she was at the mass. She laid on the bed and the shivering lasted for six hours, and then an enormous cooling followed [7]. Next, erysipelas covered down her arm and back, from the side of the cancer. On June 9th Gui Patin wrote: *“The queen is worse; erysipelas appeared on her two breasts with lots of pain and terrible nights. That is why bloodletting was performed from her arms and feet. I can see that gangrene will not be there soon, this could open Heaven for her from here to eternity”* [8].

Doctors agreed upon taking the patient to Paris. Hence, she was transported in a litter from Saint Germain, not without lots of pain and several blackouts during the trip. She was conducted to Val-de-Grâce, where she had loved to die, but the doctors and the king as well found this convent really uncomfortable. Louis personally came to take his mother to Louvre. Before departure, the wound was watered with lime-water because gangrene was already there. This trip would go to be more painful than the first one; ablutions of lime-water were doubled, but suffering did not stop, on the contrary it became so strong the queen mother nearly got mad [9]. At Louvre, the royal family was around Anne mornings and nights, while doctors did bandages over and over again.

Gui Patin let us know about a new operation made by charlatans who were around the queen mother: *“We opened the breast; the next day the queen was so bad that it was necessary to give her the Extreme Unction... she is a little bit better after her abscess was open. A lot of pus can be extracted there; but it is her right breast, and not the left one, which has a cancer ulcer”* [4, letter of August 4th). *“It is known about painful glandules around her breast... she eats a lot and purges so little... she has a new tumor on her right back shoulder... it is also said that she has a malign pimple on her leg”* [4, letter of August 18th].

This condition lasted until August 22nd when she felt much better. Her wound appeared to have a better aspect and the fever diminished. Alliot decided to act on August 24th, taking care of reducing both the doses and the number of operations; he mortified flesh, cutting it then in slices with a shaver. The recovery that appeared would last no longer [6].

*“News spread about the queen’s recovery, but I have my doubts, Gui Patin wrote on September 4th; because the day before yesterday she coughed so strong it was necessary to give her opium and it was terrible for her”*. Some days later: *“It is said the queen is better and with less pain, but it is thanks to narcotics which I consider venoms...”* [4, letter of October 13th]. *“I just arrived from a consultation with a doctor who told me about knowing for sure the queen is getting worse”* [4, letter of November 13th]. *“The queen had five bad nights, one after the other: ...her forces are running down and never come back again”* [4, letter of December 28th].

Suffering was all the more and more insupportable that the shaver was closer and closer from flesh; she only could sleep thanks to poppy juice (opium).

On January 5th 1666, the queen mother died a thousand deaths. The next day her condition got worse: fever, shivers and new erysipelas appeared, the patient was about to succumb. She was then convinced to renounce to Alliot’s attentions and to accept help from a Milanese empiric man, who was supposed to have a specific remedy for her disease [10].

On January 8th Gui Patin wrote: *“The queen is extremely exhausted; she was so fat and now she is not more than a skeleton. We are very disappointed to Mr. Alliot who was even believed not doing anything for her: The best remedy for her terrible pain was small grains from these gentlemen physicians, grains prepared with opium and May dewdrops”* [4].

On January 9th, the Milanese began his work under some doctors’ management –these doctors did not even try to discover something about the Milanese’s secret. It was about an ointment pretended to be

wonderful, which not only eliminated the terrible odor expelled by the skin. “*When the end approached, Mrs. Motteville explained, we considered her and put some scent sachets near her nose in order to relief her from this nasty odor which came out from her wound*” [3, p 330]. “*Even if she had a Spaniard leather range on her hands, Miss Montpensier said, it was possible to smell her wound just to the point of a heart failure*” [10]. According to Mrs. Motteville “*When the Countess of Ille approached to the queen for a moment, before the moribund began her agony, the poor queen talking to her about pain and odor from her breast touched her sheets and said: Look Countess, Batiste sheets!*” [3, p 332].

On January 19th, the day before this double martyr ended, because not only of her pain but also of ignorance from those who treated her, our reviewer said: “*Yesterday, the queen received The Lord... It is said her wounds are dried and that there is no danger of an upcoming gangrene. The Spain’s Ambassador has said the queen will not survive more than eight days*” [4]. However, the ambassador’s prognosis was far optimistic; the next day, January 20th 1666, at six and a half in the morning, Anne delivered her soul to God.

The story that we have just re-enacted about the last illness of Anne of Austria does not leave any doubt about the nature of the disease which took her away. It was just breast cancer. Maybe inopportune remedies and violent caustics exacerbated it, but this disease should not have been confused with any other health trouble more or less similar.

We have not forgotten that before the first symptoms of this malignant tumor stood out, the queen had fever very often; this made everyone believe about an infectious fever. Some historians were called in order to study coincidences of this royal illness with some awkward political situations and above all with some inexplicable deceases, which have just had unexpected consequences.

## Discussion

Medicine of the XVII century did not conceive cancer as a complex of diseases and did not have a clear idea of the metastatic evolution. Knowledge about this subject still came from Hippocrates and Galen’s education; they pretended cancer was a particular variety of abnormal excrescence, because it did not have anything to do with any tissue’s evolution or normal changing. Virtually, each tumor considered under this classification was external and breast tumors were considered

the most common kind. Further from these ideas, everything was uncertain. Only time was capable of verifying the exactness of diagnosis: if tumors multiplied and the patient died then it was – no doubt about it – a cancer; on the contrary, if a tumor did not develop badly and the patient survived, the doctor could declare it abnormal but not cancerous or he probably pretended having cured his patient. In addition, if a practitioner detected a tumor at an early stage of development, it was difficult to classify it. Hence, the king’s doctor, Vallot, said that “*at the beginning, cancer is often like a wart according to its color and consistency*” [11]. A description not so helpful to the identification process. Regarding Anne’s case, there was no problem at all, when Vallot examined her breast, it was in such a terrible condition that diagnosis could not be difficult to make. Vallot and his colleagues knew this kind of disease was fatal. The only thing left was to know if the patient’s life could be prolonged and how.

## Epilogue

During her last years, Anne (Figure 2) had enjoyed all the popularity which finally took her regency away. Moreover, she had never given importance to



**Figure 2.** Anne of Austria, 45 years old.

public opinion; she only cared about his son Louis' opinions, and he gave a more fair assessment than most of the people about the way she got off her duties. The same day his mother died, he declared overwhelmed that "*the queen, his mother, not only had been a great queen, but also deserved to be placed under the greatest kings' line*" [12].

Later, he paid a longer tribute to her in his Memoires. If he loved her, if he expended so much time by her side, it was not only because of the natural bond that linked them, but also because he gave her all his confidence. She had saved the Nation for him and "*the vigor that the princess used to defend my dignity, when I was not able to defend it by myself, has been the most important and useful service she could have ever paid to me*" [12].

After Louis XIV, Anne's merits were so great that not even the most eloquent men of the kingdom could equal her: "*Even the simplest story about this princess' actions will always overcome by far anything that could be said on her honor*" [12].

Few royal mothers have received from their sons such a sensitive epitaph, and really few of them have died so fulfilled.

## References

1. Kleinman R. Anne d'Autriche. Fayard, Paris, 1993, pp 499-508.
2. La Gazette De France: 18 août 1663, p 798.
3. de Motteville FB. Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire d'Anne d'Autriche, épouse de Louis XIII, roi de France, par Mme de Motteville, une de ses favorites, 5 Vol, Amsterdam, François Changuion, 1723. Éd. Petitot, Paris, 2e série, Vol. XI, 40, p 187.
4. Patin G. Lettres de Gui Patin à Charles Spon, médecin à Lyon. JB Baillière, Paris, 1846, Vol. 3, pp 493-494.
5. Bibliothèque Nationale, Salle des manuscrits, Fonds français. 17055, f 389.
6. Cabanès AU. Les morts mystérieuses de l'histoire. Deuxième série. Albin Michel, Paris, 1912, pp 41-66.
7. Tallemant Des Réaux G. Historiettes. G. Mongrédien (ed), 8 Vol., Paris, Garnier, 1932-1934.
8. Patin G. Récit de la maladie de la reine, fait le sixième février 1620. Bourriquant F, Paris, n.d.
9. Kleinman R. Facing Cancer in the Seventeenth Century: The last Illness of Anne of Austria, 1664-1666. *Advances in Thanatology* 1977; 4: 41-44.
10. Montpensier Anne Marie Louise d'Orleans, duchesse de. Mémoires de Mlle de Montpensier, fille de Gaston d'Orleans, frère de Louis XIII. Collection des mémoires relatifs à l'histoire de France, 2e série, Vol. 40-43. Petitot M (ed), Paris, 1824-1825, t. 28, p 393.
11. Saint Simon Louis de Rouvroy, duc de. Mémoires de Saint Simon. Nouv. Ed. A. de Boislisle, L. Lecestre, J. de Boislisle, Paris, Hachette, 1879-1930, Vol 28.
12. Louis XIV. Œuvres. Grimoard PH et Grouvelle PA (eds). Paris-Strasbourg, 1806, t. II.

## Correspondence to:

George Androutsos, MD  
1, Ipirou Street  
104 33 Athens  
Greece  
Tel/Fax: +30 210 8235710  
E-mail: paris48@otenet.gr