MEDICAL PRACTICE

Medical History

The Lancet 1823-1973

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Sir Winston Churchill once told a medical gathering that were he to practise he would choose to be a surgeon, because they got things done and removed offending bodies. He, for his part, liked to eradicate all evil influences.

Thomas Wakley presumably had the same thought when he named his brainchild *The Lancet*.^{*} He had been a member of the Royal College of Surgeons for six years before the urge to publish a reforming journal became overwhelming. His wish was to expose injustices wherever they were and drain away corruption in society as he would the contents of an abscess. There were several inflated personalities in the colleges and teaching hospitals he wanted to prick and so reduce them to humbler proportions. He planned to attack privilege, banish nepotism, and protect the student from exploitation and the public from malpraxis. Above all, his aim was to ensure that what was new and worthwhile for patients would be made known to all in the widely dispersed profession who cared to spend sixpence a week. His literary instrument would need to be sharp and pointed and perhaps double-edged. His confidence was such as to employ the definite article from the very first number.

This remarkable journal has retained its character and purpose throughout a century and a half and, though the hands that have wielded the instrument since the days of Thomas Wakley have been gentler, and even at times lightly gloved, the edge and the point remain as sharp as ever, ready for any

necessary operation. The founder's terms of reference do not emblazon the walls of the editorial office in Adam Street, but they and the spirit that guided him are as much part of those walls as they were in Bolt Court and in the Strand.

The Editors

THOMAS WAKLEY

"Tom Wakley" was the youngest of eight sons in a well-to-do farmer's family of eleven. The physical and mental stamina for which he was renowned were attributed to his strict and frugal upbringing in Devon, where he was noted for his wit and love of sport.

A voyage to India between two schoolings and the two changes of principal during his apprenticeship may be cited as evidence of a spirit of restlessness if not of an assertive personality, but the fact that he was 6½ years old before baptism suggests a measure of unconventionality in a family, his position in which in itself explains a determination to succeed. In 1815 he attended the Borough Hospitals and at the age of 25 married, settling in practice at No. 5 Argyle Street, the gift of a generous father-in-law; the year was 1820 just before the discovery of the Cato Street conspiracy. The story is well known how he was beaten up by intruders and his home set on fire, having been mistakenly recognized as the agent of the law who had so skilfully decapitated the hanged conspirators. This extraordinary event and the fact that the insurance company accused him of fraud, brought him notoriety, but he won his lawsuit and set up anew in Norfolk Street. What he had already seen of medicine in the West country and in London hospitals, his unfortunate experiences in Argyle Street, and the persuading influence of that radical writer and farmer, William Cobbett, in whom he had confided, undoubtedly set him on his journalistic venture.

The Lancet first appeared on Sunday, 5 October, 1823, anonymously, and excited much interest both on account of its medical and political content. Wakley vexed well-known consultants by publishing their lectures intended only for fee-paying students, exposed the contents of quack medicines, lampooned hospital boardrooms, and made war on the Royal

^{*}Ebert (*Bulletin of the Medical Librarians Association*, 1952, 40, 243) mentions a journal of this name published in Newark, N.J., in 1803 (only one issue is recorded).

College of Surgeons. Sir Astley Cooper, whom Wakley greatly admired and whose lectures he published first, in a good-natured encounter revealed the editor's identity. But fearlessly he continued to attack all vested interests within the profession to the point of being involved in ten law suits in the first decade of publication. Mr. Sergeant Talfourd was indeed kept busy. Wakley had no need to advertise, because by the end of the second year the circulation had already exceeded 4,000 copies. His spicy remarks were already being enjoyed by practitioners in the colonies.

It is not clear how much time he gave to practice; presumably very little, because he soon transferred his young family to Thistle Grove (now Drayton Gardens, London S.W.10), where he remained until their move to 35 Bedford Square in 1828. Four years later he stood unsuccessfully as an independent radical candidate for Finsbury but he was returned in 1835 when Lord Melbourne, who disliked radicals, was Prime Minister. His twofold aim in entering Parliament was to further the cause of medical reform and to acquire greater awareness of social problems. One of his first tasks was in a 2½ hour speech to plead on behalf of the Tolpuddle Martyrs. In 1839 he was appointed coroner for West Middlesex, a post which he valued because he saw and could analyse the many overlooked tragedies caused by poverty, ignorance, cruelty, and greed. With a ready pen and a voice in Parliament he was now the better able to shake the public conscience. His frame was massive, his eyes were blue and penetrating, his nose was aquiline, and he wore his golden hair long; his mouth was described as critical. "The power of the man was apparent ere ever a word was spoken," said Sir Benjamin Ward Richardson.

One winter's evening in 1851 he fainted in the doorway of his beloved office in the Strand. Three heavy loads had proved too much for him. Soon he had to abandon his parliamentary career and seek the help of his youngest son at the editor's desk, but he continued with his exacting work as coroner. In the winter of 1860 he was sent to Brighton because of cough and recurrent haemoptyses. While resting in Madeira a further bleed which followed a fall ended the life of this great social reformer, editor, and father of medical journalism on 11 May 1862. Thus a promise to expose, on his return to England, some fraudulent shipments of pseudo-Madeira wine he never fulfilled.

JAMES WAKLEY

James Wakley, who took his M.R.C.S. in 1849 and his M.D. at King's College, Aberdeen, three years later, seems in spite of a lack of clinical experience to have continued most successfully with the policy his father had developed. In his early days in office he benefited from the advice of five reliable consultants. Twenty years later the list of his distinguished leader writers had grown considerably. He is said to have had a very hot temper and, as he was a boxer of no mean calibre, his view seems only occasionally to have been challenged—and then usually to the disadvantage of the contestant. James Wakley died in 1886, the year of the Medical Act which amended the original Act of 1858.

UNCLE AND NEPHEW

James Wakley was succeeded by two who had helped him latterly, his eldest brother, Thomas Henry Wakley, and his son, Thomas Wakley junior.

Much of T. H. Wakley's early training had been in Paris, where his father had thought that the teaching was best. Early in 1848 he published a topical paper in *The Lancet* giving the results of experiments with ether and chloroform. Later in the year he was elected to the staff of the Royal Free Hospital with understandable background whisperings of nepotism and later a charge of malpraxis complicated by blackmail, resulting in a typical Wakleian court case from which the resilient defendant emerged with honour.

T. H. Wakley had the stamina of his father, commuting six days a week from Brighton to reach his editorial desk very early, even into his eighty-second year. His career as a surgeon, in which he showed a special interest in orthopaedics, had continued until

1882, though he never neglected those important duties as co-proprietor vested in him before his father's death. After his brother's death he held the editorial reins, gradually handing over to his son. He was 86 when he died in 1907. His mind moved in charity, we are told.

"Young Tom" was late in qualifying because of a fall from his bicycle which fractured his skull and impaired the sight of one eye. He entered the journal office under the tutelage of his uncle James, like him without clinical experience, and only three years before the latter's death. The father-and-son team worked well; paradoxically, it was the former who was described as young and impetuous while the latter was deliberate. So scrupulously fair was he in his dealings and thought, that he wrote little himself lest he should take sides in a matter of debate. He guided his pen so that no one should feel hurt; but, said a colleague, when he was convinced that a course was right, he welcomed plain speaking and eloquence. He was a quiet unassuming man, who loved to boat on the Thames. He remained a bachelor until the age of 52 and when he died, only two years after his ebullient father, the Wakley dynasty came to its end. The ownership of the journal then passed to a private company.

SQUIRE SPRIGGE

Samuel Squire Sprigge, a discovery of T. H. Wakley who had worked in *The Lancet* office since 1894, was the next editor. His father was a doctor and a small landowner in Norfolk, but before the lad was established in his medical training at Caius College and St. George's Hospital, he had inherited the responsibilities of an eldest son in a bereaved family. His early years after qualification were mostly in journalism: he was therefore well suited to be the historian of the founder (1897) and of *The Lancet* (1923). His many loves included lepidoptera, books, the red wines of France, littérateurs, and herbaceous borders. He was small, shy, and kindly with "a perennial youthfulness" combined with "a flavour of a past age." We read also that he was "a great and lovable personality" with "the rare gift of constructive criticism." If he did not possess the founder's pugnacity it is worth recording that he was apt to be irascible; he was also a fencer, in which pursuit he could presumably sublimate any untoward impulse of his pen.

Sir Squire was indeed a worthy upholder of the Wakleian trust, though at the centennial dinner he modestly claimed to be only the robin twittering on the milestone of the journal's road to progress. Having guided its destiny throughout the dark days of the Great War, he died of a postoperative embolism in 1937.

MORLAND AND OTHERS

Egbert Coleby Morland, the sixth editor, was already 41 years of age when he began his association with the journal in 1915 with a stop-press paper from France. In the same year he joined the staff and from 1919 onwards his name figures as co-editor on the title page of the volume—a fact which tells of the high opinion in which he was held. It was his fate to guide the journal through the early trying years of the second world war when the office was moved to Temple Street, Aylesbury. He retired in 1944 when a return to London was permitted, to be succeeded by Dr. T. F. (now Sir Theodore) Fox, who had joined the staff in 1925.

Morland's promising career had been interrupted, while on the house at Barts, by phthisis and a therapeutic sojourn in Switzerland, where later he practised for eight years before joining a Society of Friends unit in France. His interests naturally centred on tuberculosis but they widened in the war into nutrition and other aspects of social medicine. Though he was 62 when Sir Squire died, his knowledge of European medicine, his linguistic abilities, and his wide interests enhanced the journal's potential during those few difficult and depressing years in which he presided.

Thomas Wakley

James G. Wakley

Thomas H. Wakley

Thomas Wakley, jun

Sir Squire Sprigge

Egbert C. Morland

Sir Theodore Fox

Ian Douglas-Wilson

Sprigge and Morland were a powerful team because they were complementary to each other. It was said of the latter that he found the journal humane and he left it human. One who knew him well said that he gave it life because he was an artist who enabled people to see familiar things anew; also throughout his long life, saddened as it was towards its end, "he belonged to the present and future and not to the past."

Sir Theodore Fox retired in 1964 to be succeeded by the present editor Dr. Ian Douglas-Wilson, who had joined the staff in 1946 and become deputy editor in 1952; of them much will be written in 50 years' time.

While the role of the editor is all important, there are others whose efforts contribute significantly and unobtrusively to the vitality, success, and growth of any periodical: they are the proprietors, the literary and financial advisers, the assistant editors, and the editorial staff. Throughout the life of *The Lancet* this has been true of a loyal and dedicated team. We are a "friend-made paper," said Sir Squire; though the opposite was often painfully true in its early years, no happier description can be envisaged of Wakley's great enterprise, and to it no fitter compliment can be paid.

The Lancet's Rivals

In 1823 there were several medical journals in the United Kingdom and abroad publishing news, reviews, and proffered communications. *The Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal*, first published in 1805 but with a literary tradition dating from 1733, was a well-established quarterly. Edited in the shadow of Britain's then leading university school, it was nevertheless partnered by an influential medical group in London. Highly prized, it had already opened its columns to ideas on medical reform. In London there were two quarterly and five monthly medical journals. The quarterly *Medico-Chirurgical Review*, founded by Dr. James Johnson in 1818 as the *Medico-Chirurgical Journal*, wished all success to *The Lancet*, condescendingly offering to take it under its protection; but it questioned the morality of publishing a man's lectures and regretted the mixing of politics with science and the display of theatrical criticism. In reply *The Lancet* expressed great reverence for the age ("we almost said senility") of the reviewer but agreed to differ on the question of morality. Had not Beau Brummell thought it immoral to drink porter with cheese? Thus began Wakley's quarrel with this erudite journal, which rejoined by calling *The Lancet* "this minute instrument of mighty mischief."

Of the monthlies, the *London Medical and Physical Journal*, which began under this title in 1813 with a continuity going back to 1781, soon met with Wakley's opprobrium. But when in 1827 the editor, Dr. Roderick Macleod, left it to take charge of a new weekly sponsored among others by Abernethy and Brodie, Wakley found himself with a serious rival, the *London Medical Gazette*. It aimed to regain the respectable and happy pursuit of medicine which had obtained before "a set of literary plunderers" had broken in on the peace and quiet of the profession. Lecturers had seen the produce of their lives snatched from them and published for the profit of others. Thus wrote Macleod, who believed that it was possible to publish a weekly without the seasoning of personal abuse. "Roderick the Goth" now found himself in the front line facing *The Lancet* artillery.

When a modest quarterly appeared in 1828 entitled the *Midland Medical and Surgical Reporter* it was praised by *The Lancet* but its anonymous editor was, for many years to come, to receive periodic and painful thrusts from Wakley's pen: he was Charles Hastings and his brainchild was the forerunner of today's *British Medical Journal*.*

*A prospectus for a monthly *British Medical Journal* was circulated towards the end of 1798 but it appears never to have been published (*B.M.J.*, 1918, 1, 183; 1936, 2, 777).

Several ventures in medical journalism failed in the first three-quarters of the last century, and many a doctor tried his hand unsuccessfully with the pen of anonymity.

Even a captive circulation was no guarantee of success as the Provincial Medical and Surgical Association was to learn. The promising Dr. Michael Ryan who edited the *London Medical and Surgical Journal* failed because of quarrels with his publisher, the latter setting up in opposition, to the detriment of both. The sword of James Yearsley, who edited *The Medical Circular*, was, we are told, too readily unsheathed, while the resolute Dr. Macleod, described as a scholar and gentleman, was "not fitted to grapple with the Boanerges to whom he was opposed." Why the monthly *Medical Intelligence* ceased production without explanation in December 1823 after a life of four years is not clear. It makes no mention of *The Lancet* and the timing of its demise seems to be coincidental. It contained mostly reviews and cost only 8d., but a scholarly practitioner may well have thought the *Medico-Chirurgical Review* better value at 6s. a time.

The Scalpel had little hope of success. Printed and published weekly in Southwark it first appeared three weeks after *The Lancet* and ceased production four months later. It too published the famous lectures of Sir Astley Cooper but extremely little else. At 2d. a time it could have appealed to students especially when the anonymous editor in his introduction accused *The Lancet* of inaccurate reporting. The title of this journal,* he said, was not "chosen from any affectation of quaintness."

There were two other weeklies in 1823, the *Medico-Chirurgical and Philosophical Magazine* and the *Medical Adviser*. The former cost 4d. and ran only from February to 2 December of that year, ceasing for no known reason. The latter began when the former ceased and it continued until June 1825. The editor, Alexander Burnett, M.D., aimed to provide a source of medical knowledge for the public "without being mulcted or empirically duped." Designed for the literate layman rather than the medical practitioner, it was in no way a challenge to *The Lancet*, but it would surely have commanded Wakley's sympathy. It campaigned for good health and long life and against quackery and injustice. It is very readable and was splendid value for 3d. a week. The first article, topped by a realistic engraving, exposed the inhumanity of the treadmill for women felons in Coldbath Fields.

The Lancet and the B.M.A.

"Masculine and comprehensive" was Wakley's immediate response to the news of the founding of the Provincial Medical and Surgical Association in 1832 but almost immediately the Worcester physician was accused of "a remarkable perversion of judgement" because of his tacit acceptance of colleges of privilege. Wakley liked what he heard of the first annual meeting at Bristol, but why had this much wanted body not been named the British Medical Association? By 1837, however, he had grown impatient of "the Migratory Club" and lamented the fact that general practitioners, who perforce entered their rightful college through the back door in Portugal Street, were now following their self-appointed leaders, "the Dubs" and "the Pures" round the country like a band of strolling players. The P.M.A., he wrote, was one of the most monstrous of all our medical abortions. By now this militant editor was sponsoring Dr. George Webster's London-based British Medical Association. ("There is no tawdry milliner-like tinsel in this Association"), which survived until 1846. It was but one of several attempts to unite the profession during that tedious but tendentious quarter century between the call for reform in Bristol and the Medical Act of 1858.

If the B.M.A. had failed to satisfy Wakley's restless soul, their *Transactions* fell even shorter of his expectation: they were branded as "worthless unsalable lucubrations." Nevertheless, by 1847 the Association's ascendancy was being welcomed to the extent that volume XV was deemed to do them honour. By 1851 Wakley had nothing but praise for Sir

Charles, whose biographical memoir he published that year, and for his Association. He called on the medical "élite" of London to attend the annual meeting at Brighton and stretch out the hand of friendship to their provincial brethren, which they did. In 1854 Wakley actually joined the P.M.A.

The Lancet's attitude to the P.M.A. was thus basically one of welcome and encouragement. The harsh and often outrageous outpourings of criticism and contempt in the reforming 'thirties and 'forties were really well intentioned ("we speak more in sorrow than in anger") and had largely ceased by the time of Wakley's physical collapse in 1851, by which time he had realized that, unlike the two colleges, Hastings had the interests of the whole profession at heart—and especially those of the general practitioner. The treatment of the P.M.A. was therefore no different from that meted out to other organizations, and indeed to individuals. Praise could follow censure, and with equal rapidity censure could follow praise. Principle always came before the individual, as witness his merciless attack on Bransby Cooper, whom after death he called "this most worthy man."

REBUKE FOR THE B.M.J.

Relations between the two journals were not always happy. In 1864 the *B.M.J.* was rebuked for degrading the French Medical Association to the level of a mere provident fund and for the violence of its language. It was admonished to substitute argument for its "present habitual weapon of ungentlemanly vituperation" and on another occasion *The Lancet* complained of the 'Billingsgate abuse' in the Association's "silly bantling."

This feud appears to have originated during Dr. (later Sir) John Rose Cormack's editorship of the Association's journal, from 1853 to his resignation in September 1855. He was angered by the election of Wakley to the Metropolitan branch, whose influence on Hastings he feared, and it is interesting to note that in the latter year the Association's editor was living at 37 Bedford Square, next door but one to Wakeley. Relations were again strained in 1866, when the young and promising Ernest Hart left *The Lancet* abruptly to take over the editorship of the *B.M.J.* at a difficult stage of its life; this he did with considerable success. There was talk of bitter enmity between him and the proprietors of *The Lancet* and it would seem that Hart and James Wakley were completely antipathetic to each other. In time a residual coolness between the two offices disappeared, mutual respect and friendship being finally sealed in 1917 when Dr. Gerald Horner, who had become Sprigge's assistant in 1911, transferred to 429 Strand to work with Dr. (later Sir Dawson) Williams, the editor of the *B.M.J.*

The Scope of The Lancet

There is scarcely an aspect of man and his environment that has not been covered by *The Lancet* in its century and a half of vigorous life. In its early years Wakley's concern was to legitimize general practitioners and his first target was the Royal College of Surgeons, stronghold of "the pures," to which many belonged, albeit disfranchised. When the supplementary charter of 1843 made it clear that members were still to be regarded as second-class citizens, he began to look round for alternatives. His Medical Reform Bill of 1846 which provided for a register, and therefore the outlawing of pretenders, was an important step on the road to the Act of 1858.

Concern for paupers, prisoners, and lunatics sprang from his experiences as a coroner, but other important topics occupied the reader's attention in succeeding years: these included the adulteration of food (they began with coffee);

*There were two subsequent *Scalpels*; the first in New York from 1849 to 1851, the second in London from 1896 to 1900. The latter makes no mention of its London precursor.

safety and comfort on railways; the health hazards of tobacco (1857); tight-lacing ("if women needed buttresses they would be born with them"); medical insurance; balloon sickness; inflammable clothing; and a peerage for Sir Benjamin Brodie.*

As pioneers in "Women's Lib" it saw no reason why the other sex should not swim, and it congratulated the Quaker gentleman who had fenced in part of a mere with reeds so that his fair daughters could disport themselves in total privacy. *The Lancet's* attitude to women in medicine was predictable. It did not dispute their right to practise but it questioned the propriety of their so doing. They would surely never sound for the stone? Why, even treating male children could present indecencies and difficulties. How could a woman *enceinte* face up to some of the sights to be expected by a medical practitioner; it would be bad for her child. Suppose her husband bade her administer strychnine to her patients would she not be bound by her marriage vows? The writing was already on the wall because, as *The Lancet* recalled, the New England Medical College for Women had in 1854 produced its first ripe fruits in the shape of four doctresses. It was the year when "Miss Doctor Blackwell" was denied access to the wards of the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. In 1861 it broke the news of the arrival of the vanguard of "the Amazonian army" at the Middlesex Hospital and congratulated Miss Garnett on having qualified and hoped that she would be able to vindicate her mission "whatever that may be." In 1866 it acknowledged that she was "a great credit." The journal was not always right: in 1828 it prophesied the impending demise of the Medico-Chirurgical Society of London, but its splendid metamorphosis into the Royal Society of Medicine did not take place until 1907.

POST-WAR YEARS

Immediately after the first world war the journals were occupied with Sir Bertrand Dawson's Cavendish Lectures of July 1918 and suggestions for the newly established Ministry of Health with its Consultative Committee. An important

*This was in 1858, four years before Brodie's death. Sir Joseph Lister in 1897 was the first medical practitioner to receive a barony. Sir Berkeley Moynihan in 1929 was the next surgeon to be so honoured. The first practising physician to be elevated to the House of Lords was Sir Bertrand Dawson in 1920: in 1936 he was created viscount.

leader on "Medicine and the State" appeared early in 1919. Almost forgotten now are the French supplements produced monthly from September 1918 for a period of four years. They were edited by two Parisian consultants, Professor Charles Achard and Dr. Charles Flandin, D.S.O., who wished to see the Union that had replaced the Entente continued after the war in all fields of human activity. The supplement amounted to two or three papers from French authors presented in English. Was this early harbinger of our entry into the E.E.C. inspired by Dr. Morland or was it an expression of that francophilia that seems happily to have characterized the editorial office since the days of the founder? In 1923 Sir Squire hoped that the supplements would be revived.

The Lancet is welcomed because of its scientific interest, its wide outlook, and its piquancy; it is admired for its independence, tradition, and integrity. It is fresh and up to the minute. Medical and social historians will find on library shelves some 13 cwt of closely packed pages of facts and comment to occupy pleasant and worthwhile hours of research. It is also a highly successful school for writers. Innumerable contributors have been and are grateful to the professional pruners and filleters for improvements in their manuscripts and to editors for kindly suggestions and encouragement.

Today we look back with some amusement on the journal's stormy adolescence and its ravings about Halford College, Rhubarb Hall, and Gallipot Lodge. The BAT club has ceased to meet at the Hole-in-the-Wall Tavern and The Old Tallyrand in the Castle of Indolence in Pall Mall no longer looks on disapprovingly. Lord Homeopathy, Mr. Placehunter, and Sir John Herbalist are long since forgotten, and so are the Railway bubble knaves. "The Mausoleum" and the "Yellow Fungus" have ceased publication. The tomahawks and scalping knives are laid to rest and a successful colleague is no longer called "the effeminate pet of worm-eaten duchesses." But we still have the Intercepted Letter and other reminders of the past with that wit for which Thomas Wakley was noted even as a boy. It is doubtful if the punch still circulates round the editorial table on Friday nights and it is inconceivable that reviewers still receive a Christmas barrel of oysters, but the tradition of this excellent journal is strict and true as it steers its way into the future with a heavy responsibility.

The photographs of Sir Theodore Fox and Dr. Ian Douglas-Wilson were supplied by Bassano and Vandyk