broad outline of the picture. The next day, involving the most challenging part of the commission, painting the head and face, was the most trying day for me because I was unable to move my head without upsetting the pose. The artist often consulted the photographs and to my surprise used a tape measure to determine the relationships between various parts of my face. The technique of facial measurement derives from Holbein, the sixteenth century Dutch portraitist. Quick facial sketches are satisfactory for street corner artists using crayons on paper but not for a serious portrait.

The artist's equipment consists of a palette and many brushes of various thicknesses, but most fascinating was his maulstick. This is a pole-like device that allowed him to maintain a steady hand for fine detail.

The third day, spent painting the hands, was a more relaxed time for me as I could move my head, but I could not read until this part of the painting was completed. The next two days were spent painting the

body and the clothes. These were easy days for me and it was satisfying to see progress in the painting after each session.

After five days the painting was almost complete. Adding the finishing touches to the figure and painting the props and background took about two weeks, after I had returned home. The artist agreed that he would supervise the framing of the picture, and the lettering on the label was decided. There are only three professional framers in London; framers are also responsible for varnishing the picture.

Two months after the sitting the finished portrait arrived in Dublin. It was a pleasing likeness, even if the figure was somewhat portly. The sitting was made tolerable by the courtesy of the artist, whose cheerful manner kept me amused for five days. It was a learning experience, and I gained an artist as a friend.

1 Sheeran I. How to commission a portrait. *BMJ* 1989;299:37-9.

2 Turner MJ, Rasmussen MJ, Stronge JM. Active management of labour. *Fet Med Rev* 1991;3:67-72.

Dickens and doctors: vignettes of Victorian medicine

J E Cosnett

Doctors are prominently represented in Charles Dickens's fiction. In 14 major works there are at least 27 members of the medical profession, some named, others anonymous. The main medical personalities provide vignettes of Victorian medicine, seen through the eyes of a very observant, critical, and socially conscious layman.

Medical students and medical education

Most prominent among medical students are Bob Sawyer and his friend Benjamin Allen, who appear in *Pickwick Papers*. At the time of writing Dickens was 24 years old; he must have associated with London medical students and learnt of their curriculum and

lifestyle. Sam Weller introduced Sawyer and Allen to Pickwick as "not reg'lar thoroughbred sawbones." Pickwick attributed their lack of social graces to "eccentricities of genius." Like later generations of students, they relish their esoteric status and ability to shock their lay friends with privy talk such as "Nothing like dissecting to give one an appetite." They discuss a "good accident brought into the casualty ward." They have riotous drinking parties in lodgings for which the bill is in arrears, and their landlady describes them as a "parcel of young cutters and carvers of live peoples' bodies, that disgraces the lodgings."

Another sight of medical studies is given by Richard Carstone in *Bleak House*. On an impulse, while undecided about a career, Richard undertakes to "become an MRCS." He had spent eight years at a public school and "learned to make Latin verses to perfection," but he "never had much chance of finding out for himself what he was fitted for . . . and was never guided." However, "the more he thought of it, the more he felt that his destiny was clear; the art of healing was the art of all others for him." He was apprenticed to Mr Bayham Badger, "who had a good practice at Chelsea, and attended a large public Institution besides." He received Richard into his house and undertook to "superintend his studies."

Later Richard "felt languid about the profession" and confessed that "he had misunderstood his inclinations." He considered changing to the legal profession, but wavered, finally deciding to leave medicine when he was "obliged to spend twelve pounds, at a blow, for some heart-breaking lecture fees." (At this time, parish surgeons earned as little as £20 a year.)

Postgraduate career choices

Dickens's doctors had four main avenues of career choice after qualification. Those with financial backing might enter general practice, possibly with the prospect of appointment to an institution. The young doctor without means was forced to consider seeking appointment as a parochial surgeon or to join the army or, worse, the navy as a ship's surgeon. Allan Woodcourt, the young medical hero of *Bleak House*, initially served as a navy surgeon, then became a parochial surgeon after he had wooed and married

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BMJ 1992;305:1540-2

Little Nell has medical attention.
Detail from drawing by Phiz
(Hablot K Browne)

"Riotous drinking parties in lodgings for which the bill is in arrears"—Victorian values among medical students

HULTON DEUTSCH

Esther Summerson. The conditions of service of naval surgeons were deplored by Dickens. In the appointment of parochial surgeons the choice usually fell on "bad or inexperienced doctors since they were cheapest."

A few qualified men gave up medical practice. Harold Skimpole "had been educated for the medical profession ... but he had never been able to prescribe with the requisite accuracy of detail ... and when he was wanted to bleed ... or physic ... he was generally found lying on his back, in bed, reading the newspapers." In New York, Martin Chuzzlewit was helped by Dr Bevan, whose "profession was physic, though he seldom or never practised."

General practitioners

Bob Sawyer reappears when he is beginning practice in Bristol. Money still escapes him, and he uses various stratagems to make his name known. These include delivering medicines to wrong addresses, and next day sending messages of apology: "Very sorry—his mistake—immense business—great many parcels to deliver—Mr Sawyer's compliments." Later he complains that "the poor people patronise me.... They knock me up, at all hours of the night: they take medicines to an extent which I should have conceived impossible; they put on blisters and leeches with a perseverance worthy of a better cause: they make additions to their families in a manner which is quite awful" and then offer "little promissory notes." Sawyer and his friend Allen conclude that the only remedy for the financial stringency is for Sawyer to marry Arabella, who is due for a legacy of one thousand pounds on coming of age, or on marriage. Arabella, Sawyer remarks, has "only one fault ... and that is a want of taste. She don't like me."

Also in *Pickwick Papers*, beset by similar mercenary motives, is Dr Slammer, surgeon to the 29th, "a little fat man ... a popular personage ... who was indefatigable in paying the most unremitting and devoted attention to a little old widow, whose rich dress and profusion of ornament bespoke her a most desirable addition to a limited income."

Oliver Twist had contact with three doctors. The parish surgeon, at his birth, had "difficulty in inducing Oliver to take upon himself the office of respiration ... he had not been possessed of that very useful appendage, a voice, for ... longer than three minutes and a quarter" but then "proceeded to advertise to the

inmates of the workhouse the fact of a new burden having been imposed on the parish."

At the Brownlow establishment Oliver was attended by "a gentleman with a very large and loud-ticking gold watch in his hand, who felt his pulse, and said he was a great deal better." This doctor showed great diplomacy, but lack of originality, in agreeing with all the symptomatology offered by his patient. Mr Losberne, the "surgeon in the neighbourhood" who attended to Oliver's wounds in the Maylie home, had "grown fat, more from good humour than from good living: and was kind and hearty ... an eccentric old bachelor." As a friend and family counsellor of the Maylies, he saved Oliver from arrest by the Bow Street runners.

Another *Pickwickian* doctor distinguished by tact and diplomacy was the man called to Mrs Trundle, who was in a "delicate state of health." He said that she "ought to know best how she felt herself." The doctor, "a wise and discreet doctor who knew what was good for himself," agreed with her proposed trip to London, and "with great attention sent ... medicine to be drunk upon the road." In somewhat the same mould was Dr Lumbey who, having delivered Mrs Kenwigs's sixth child, was emphatic that "It's the finest boy I ever saw in all my life. I never saw such a baby." Dickens comments: "It is a pleasant thing to reflect upon, and furnishes a complete answer to those who contend for the gradual degeneration of the human species, that every baby born into the world is a finer one than the last." He ultimately fathered 10 children, and probably wrote from personal experience. Dr Lumbey ridiculed Mr Kenwigs's suggestion that six children were "almost enough." "Nonsense," he said, "not half enough."

Doctors' treatments and prescriptions were often anticipated by the lay public. In *The Old Curiosity Shop* Little Nell has medical attention from a "red-nosed gentleman" who took "his seat by the bedside ... drew out his watch and felt her pulse." All his practical therapeutic suggestions were already in progress, so that, as he departed, he left "the whole house in admiration of that wisdom which tallied so closely with their own. Everybody said he was a very shrewd doctor indeed."

In the pages of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Dr John Jobling, MRCS, was less modest and more anxious to impress. He "had a peculiar way of smacking his lips and saying 'Ah!' at intervals while patients detailed their symptoms, which inspired great confidence ... he talked on all occasions whether he had anything to say or not.... His female patients could never praise him too highly." He was keen to display knowledge: "We know a few secrets of nature in our profession.... We study for that; we pass the Hall and the College for that; and we take our station in society by that."

Also in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Dr Lewsome had been "bred a surgeon ... but served a general practitioner in the City, as his assistant." He was persuaded to apply what would today be called euthanasia to old Mr Anthony Chuzzlewit on the grounds that he was "weak, imbecile and drivelling; as unbearable to himself as he was to other people ... it would be a charity to put him out of the way ... mixing something with the stuff he took for his cough ... should help him to die easily." The argument used was that "people were sometimes smothered who were bitten by mad dogs ... why not help these lingering old men out of their troubles too?" Such arguments have a familiar ring 150 years later.

Some family practitioners were held in great respect, not only as doctors. Dr Chillip attended Mrs Copperfield at David's birth and remained counsellor and friend into David's adulthood. He comforted David on the death of his mother and allowed him to "enjoy the

Dr Slammer, surgeon to the 29th,
"a little fat man . . ."

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happiness of passing an afternoon in his closet of a surgery; reading some book that was new to me, with the smell of the whole pharmacopoeia coming up my nose, or pounding something in a mortar under his mild directions." Years later they met by chance, and Dr Chillip spurned gossip by saying, "a medical man, being so much in families, ought to have neither eyes nor ears for anything but his profession."

Dickens's most charismatic medical personality is Dr Allan Woodcourt in *Bleak House*. One of his patients was Miss Flite, whom he attended with "much solicitude and compassion." His patient judged him to be the "kindest physician in the college. . . . All his widowed mother could spare had been spent in qualifying him for his profession. It was not lucrative to a young practitioner, with very little influence in London . . . though he did wonders of gentleness and skill for . . . numbers of poor people . . . he gained very little by it in money." So he enrolled as a naval surgeon, sailed to the Far East, and in a shipwreck saved many lives. On his return "the whole country rings" with his heroism. Miss Flite felt that her "brave physician ought to have a Title" and his sweetheart, Esther, "could have kneeled down . . . and blessed him, in my rapture that he should be so truly good and brave." Ultimately he learnt of the proposed appointment of a "medical attendant for the poor . . . at a certain place in Yorkshire." This presented an "opening for a man whose hopes and aims may . . . lie above the ordinary level . . . it should prove to be a way of usefulness and good service . . . an appointment to a great amount of work and a small amount of pay; but better things will gather about it." Dr Woodcourt was appointed, married, and settled in the practice in which, Esther wrote, "I never lie down at night, but I know that in the course of that day he has alleviated pain, and soothed some fellow creature in the time of need . . . thanks have gone up for his patient ministration. . . . We are not rich in the bank" but "is this not to be rich?"

Next to Woodcourt, the most prominent doctor in Dickens' novels is Dr Manette, trained in Paris but later in practice in London. Having recovered his memory after years of imprisonment, he "received such patients as his old reputation . . . brought him. His scientific knowledge, and his knowledge and skill in conducting ingenious experiments, brought him otherwise into moderate request, and he earned as

much as he wanted." When he returned to Paris to secure the release of Darnay "he kept himself . . . as a physician, whose business was with all degrees of mankind . . . he used his influence so wisely, that he was soon the inspecting physician of three prisons."

Consultants

Some senior doctors achieved consultant status—through experience, appointments, and reputation. Prominent among these was the nameless "great Physician" of *Little Dorrit*—the "famous physician, who knew everybody, and whom everybody knew . . . a profound professor of the healing art . . . a composed man, who performed neither on his own trumpet nor on the trumpets of other people. . . . He went, like the rain, among the just and unjust, doing all the good he could, and neither proclaiming it in synagogues nor at the corners of the streets." This character is almost certainly based on Dickens's friend, Dr John Elliotson, FRCP. Their friendship was originally founded on their mutual interest in mesmerism and phrenology. Use of mesmerism with patients led to Elliotson's disfavour among his colleagues and his resignation from posts at University College Hospital.

An eminent consultant obstetrician was Dr Parker Peps, who supervised the birth of Paul Dombey. He was "one of the Court Physicians, a man of immense reputation for assisting at the increase of great families." He and the "family surgeon," Mr Pilkins, indulged in public mutual admiration, and Dr Peps publicly confused the name of Mrs Dombey with various titled ladies, to advertise his high connections.

When Smike was suffering from his chronic and ultimately fatal illness Nicholas Nickleby "carried him to a physician of great repute." The conclusion was that "there was no cause for immediate alarm . . . there were no present symptoms which could be deemed conclusive. . . . The constitution had been greatly tried and injured in childhood." It is likely that the condition which Dickens portrayed was tuberculosis.

A funny lot

Dickens sometimes poked gentle cynical fun at doctors' consultations. Investigating the Maylie house-breaking, the policemen "held a long council together, compared with which, for secrecy and solemnity, a consultation of great doctors on the knottiest point in medicine, would be mere child's play."

In the "Madman's manuscript" of *Pickwick Papers* a lady was "bereft of animation for hours" and later "raved wildly and furiously." Her husband recalls that "doctors were called in—great men who rolled up to my door in easy carriages, with fine horses and gaudy servants. They were at her bedside for weeks. They had a great meeting, and consulted together in low and solemn voices. . . . One, the cleverest and most celebrated among them, took me aside, and, bidding me prepare for the worst, told me—the madman!—that my wife was mad."

In his final illness young Paul Dombey "was visited by as many as three grave doctors—they used to assemble downstairs and come up together. . . . Paul was so observant of them . . . that he even knew the difference in the sound of their watches."

From his characterisations it seems that Dickens had respect and admiration for most doctors, as exemplified by Allan Woodcourt and Dr Chillip. But there were features among others that prompted veiled criticism and subtle sarcasm. These were avarice and hypocrisy, manipulation of society for their own ends, and a tendency to prolixity in consultation. Were he writing today, would Dickens think that these were extinct among doctors?