Middle Articles

MEDICAL HISTORY

The Worshipful Society of Apothecaries of London—1617–1967

W. S. C. COPEMAN, C.B.E., M.D., F.R.C.P.

[WITH SPECIAL PLATE BETWEEN PAGES 540 AND 541]

Brit. med. J., 1967, 4, 540–541

The Ancient City Companies and Guilds were formed in mediaeval times as “friendly societies” for mutual help among members of certain trades and crafts, and for the relief of their distressed colleagues. Since Elizabethan times the Grocers’ Company had imported spices and drugs from the newly discovered countries to the far east and west, and had compounded medicines from these. Those members of that company who performed this useful function were known as apothecaries. As early as 1525, however, we hear of the Apothecarial Grocers petitioning for a corporation of their own, as their art was a separate one and should not be subordinated to fallible tradesmen like grocers who favoured only the mercenary part of their trade. Their wish was not then granted, but it became obvious that secession was imminent, as a new profession, pharmacy, involving special training and study, was evolving.

The Charter

In 1616 the Royal Apothecary, Gideon De Laune, with the co-operation of Sir Theodore de Mayerne, the Court Physician, again petitioned King James I for a charter such as had been granted a century previously to the physicians. Lord Chancellor Francis Bacon approved, and the King agreed, saying, “Grocers are but merchants, the business of an apothecary is a Mystery, wherefore I think it fitting that they be a Corporation of themselves.” This, however, greatly displeased the powerful city fathers and the College of Physicians, which was then in the city; so in conjunction they placed every obstacle in the path of the new company and succeeded in delaying its charter until 6 December 1617, on which day it finally passed the Great Seal. Thus the apothecaries were free at last, but with little money and no headquarters. They possessed boundless confidence in their future, however, and their written records have survived unbroken from that day, enabling us to reconstruct their unique story.

The new company, or society, now regarded its main function as being to improve the quality of all drugs sold to His Majesty’s subjects, and also to supervise and improve the qualifications of the vendors. Their charter gave them the right to search apothecaries’ shops within a seven-mile radius of Cornhill, and to destroy all materials found which they considered below standard. With incautious naiveté, which they would regret for two centuries, they agreed “to put their dependence upon the liberal-minded College of Physicians,” whose prescriptions they dispensed and who they felt sure would be more sympathetic to their aims than the mercenary grocers.

With the death of their protector King James, however, the College at once claimed before the Privy Council the right to control “those lowly dispensers of drugs and boluses.” But the newly incorporated apothecaries had stout hearts and nursed ambitions of their own; they boldly opposed the claims of the College—and won—but not before the physicians had obtained a draft Order in Council which ordained that “No Apothecary was to sell any poyson drugges or medicines” except on their prescription. The indignant apothecaries suggested with some justice that if to prevent danger they might not sell drugs, then cutlers should be forbidden to sell knives and the gun-makers pistols. This argument impressed the Attorney-General, and the matter was dropped.

Evolution of the General Practitioner

London in 1617 was still a mediaeval city in appearance, confined within walls, with dark narrow streets bordered by rickety half-timbered homes in which the merchants lived above their businesses. The chief highway was the river, and the whole was dominated by the towering Gothic pile of St. Paul’s. Its chief playwright was William Shakespeare. The apothecaries mostly congregated around “sweet-smelling” Bucklesbury, where they stored and retailed their drugs and other medicaments.

At the time the medical profession consisted of physicians, who were learned, unpractical, scarce, and expensive; surgeons, who were unlettered craftsmen of lowly status; and quacks—some very picturesque characters, but undoubtedly dangerous. Until the dissolution of the monasteries the monks had also occupied an important role in the care of the sick poor. There were no general practitioners or family doctors.

It seems inevitable that apothecaries should have often included a little free advice with the package of drugs, and so in time the indigent sick came to look upon the apothecaries as their general medical advisers and attendants. Indeed, this position seems to have been forced upon them both by the large numbers of sufferers “unable or unwilling to fee a physician” who sought their aid, as well as the exodus of most physicians from the city during the frequent epidemics of the plague. They recognized that they had no right to claim a fee for such advice, but found adequate remuneration through their charges for dispensing the remedies. At a later stage, particularly in country districts, the apothecary would leave his shop and visit such clients at their homes, so becoming in fact their general medical attendant.

Such behaviour infringed the College of Physicians’ legal monopoly of medical practice within the city and for seven

THE WORSHIPFUL SOCIETY OF APOTHECARIES

W. S. C. Copeman

The Great Hall. This is now the oldest surviving hall in the City of London. The 24-branch candelabrum was presented by Sir Benjamin Rawling, who was Master of the Society in 1736. The great chest was given to the Society in 1668 by Sir William Clarke.

The Entry to the Hall, in Black Friars Lane. This was built in 1786, and opens into a paved court.

The Court Room. This was completely panelled in oak in 1672 and it contains portraits of previous officers of the Society, among them of Gideon De Laune — the reputed founder of the Society—and of John Hunter, by Reynolds.

W. S. C. COPEMAN: THE WORSHIPFUL SOCIETY OF APOTHECARIES

The Parlour. This contains a pine mantel by William Kent, by which a wartime bomb fell but failed to explode.

The Court in Session. Members of Court (from left to right) Mr. Ian M. Jackson, Mr. Ernest Busby (clerk), Sir Ronald Bodley Scott, Dr. R. Donald Teare, Dr. E. Grey-Turner, Dr. G. B. Mitchell-Heggs, Sir Brian Windeyer, Sir Arthur Porritt, Mr. Alistair L. Gunn, Sir John Richardson, Dr. Redvers N. Ironside, Dr. Peter Bishop, The Bedel, Dr. Hugh M. Sinclair (Senior Warden), Dr. Macdonald Crutchley, Mr. T. Keith Lyle (foreground), Mr. Harold C. Edwards (Master), Dr. R. R. Trail, Mr. Henry R. Thompson (Junior Warden), Mr. A. M. A. Moore, Sir Charles Dodds, Dr. W. S. C. Copeman, and Sir Cecil Wakeley.

miles around, and was punishable by imprisonment on the orders of its president in any prison other than the Tower of London, and confiscation of their stock. Thus the issue between the College and the company crystallized into the latter's right to practise (without direct fee) as well as dispense.

The dispute continued with increasing acrimony throughout the years of the Civil War, during which the city influence of the apothecaries increased as the College followed the King to Oxford. Both bodies lost their premises during the Great Fire of London, but the apothecaries, being on the spot, were able to rebuild theirs in its present form on the site of the old Black Friars' Monastery. As they increased in status and wealth they added to their possessions a State barge with 18 lusty watermen, and in 1673, as London expanded and it became more difficult to find the wild herbs and roots which were their stock-in-trade, they acquired a physic garden of four and a half acres on the river bank at Chelsea from Lord Cheyne, where these could be grown and the instruction of their apprentices carried out. In the early eighteenth century the company's finances declined, and but for the generosity of Sir Hans Sloane the garden would have had to be sold. Many of those whose names feature on the roll of fame for botany and medicine received their training in this garden, which still stands where it did and is a focal point of modern botanical and agricultural research under the auspices of London University.

The Rose Case

In 1704 the final clash between the College and the apothecaries took place. William Rose, a liveryman of the company, was sued as a test case by the College for treating a patient without the intermediary of a physician, and the case was decided against him in the Queen's Bench Division. The House of Lords, however, reversed this decision on appeal, holding that despite the existing law it was contrary to custom and against the public interest to prevent the giving of advice and treatment by members of the Apothecaries' Company. Thus the age-long monopoly of the College was broken. Henceforward the apprentice who had satisfied his examiners at Apothecaries' Hall and taken up the Freedom of the City was free to practise, without fear of prosecution, as well as compound his medicines, although he had another century to wait before he was allowed to charge for his advice as well as his remedies. It was in this way that the British dispensing doctor arose, as did the public's continuing expectation of a routine bottle of medicine when they visit their general practitioner. It was not until the Medical Act of 1858, which established the General Medical Council, that the practice of charging a fee for advice or visiting only was finally legalized and the modern family doctor emerged.

Some apothecaries did not aspire to become medical practitioners, however, and such men continued in pharmaceutical business, some of which prospered greatly and grew into firms whose names are today household words. Others broke away and in 1841 formed the Pharmaceutical Society. Still others answered the call of science and followed the academic path.

Reform

Following the political unrest engendered throughout Europe by the French Revolution the desire for "reform" spread rapidly, and the medical fraternity became involved. The chief need was thought to be for the institution of more systematic and practical teaching which would culminate in a standardized examination system. These matters were long debated in Parliament but found little support from the two Royal Colleges.

It was therefore a surprise to the Society of Apothecaries, who had been forward in this field, when the choice fell upon them to carry through these reforms. By the great Apothecaries' Act of 1815 the Society suddenly found itself in control of all general medical practice throughout England and Wales, and in the recent words of Sir Zachary Cope: "There are few in this generation who realize what an important part the Society of Apothecaries has taken in the development of medical education in this country, and in creating that type of modern practice which is a cause for legitimate pride."

The lives of Englishmen have always been ruled more by custom than logic, and the medical profession, as Underwood has pointed out, has developed in a way unlike anywhere else in Europe. For a city mercantile company to have been entrusted by the State with the control of a learned profession, as were the apothecaries by the Act of 1815, might seem inconceivable. The task was, however, willingly undertaken, and, possibly somewhat to their own surprise, brilliantly carried through. Thus the erstwhile apprentices of a city trade-guild rose from the humble status of mere minor shopkeepers and developed in the course of three centuries to that professional status which had always been their ambition, and by the end of the Victorian era they could show clear title to rank as members of a learned and respected profession, as they do today.

Present and Future

The Society maintains the mediaeval domestic hierarchy common to all city companies. The apprentice becomes in due course a yeoman (or journeyman), and later, if approved, a liveryman, and so entitled to the Freedom of the City and all those privileges which accompany such status. The governing body is the Court, which consists of 24 senior members, headed by the master and his two wardens.

A monthly examination is held for candidates for the Society's medical qualifying diploma (L.M.S.S.A.); and postgraduate diplomas are also awarded in midwifery, industrial health, and medical jurisprudence. Its certificate in dispensing is also eagerly sought by hospital and commercial technicians. The study of history is fostered by the Faculty of the History of Medicine and Pharmacy, which like the parent Society has a number of endowed lectureships, including that named after Gideon De Laune, its founder.

The continuing interest of the Society in medical education—a subject in which it pioneered—was recognized by the recent request for two memoranda by the Royal Commission on Medical Education, which is at present sitting.

As to the future, the Society looks forward confident that it will continue to play an important part in the continuing development of all branches of our profession. It is thus perhaps fitting to end this brief epitome of the Society's long and eventful period of evolution with the pious aspiration of its members as expressed in the Master's Toast given after every meal: "The Worshipful Society of Apothecaries of London, May it flourish, root and branch, giving help and health to all—till Time ceases."

The illustrations are taken from the *History of the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries*, by Dr. W. S. C. Copeman, by kind permission of the Pergamon Press. This book was published on 30 November, price 63s.

REFERENCES

- Cope, Sir V. Z. (1956). Gideon De Laune lecture, *Brit. med. J.*, 1, i.
Copeman, W. S. C. (1967). *The Worshipful Society of Apothecaries of London*. Pergamon Press.
Underwood, E. A. (1963). *History of the Society of Apothecaries*.