Medical History

Centenary of the Birth of Robert Hutchison

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Robert Hutchison was born on 28 October 1871, the son of a forestry expert whose work on trees and shrubs earned for him the Fellowship of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. As a young lad tramping each day four miles to school across the hills of Midlothian with his pockets full of oatcake, Robert was filled with a burning desire to cut up his older brother to see what made him tick. And so a few years afterwards Scotland presented to England a young man who was destined to become a superb physician, an eminent scholar, a great writer, a most inspiring teacher, a shrewd and gifted clinician, and above all a most kindly gentleman.

Though his career was so outstanding and successful he remained always modest and unassuming. He inspired real affection in those with whom he worked. His shafts of wit sent home his teaching points and his powers of instruction inspired a large number of physicians and paediatricians. He was a general physician with special interests in gastro-enterology and diseases of children. Throughout his long life he never recovered from his surprise that, having come from Edinburgh as a young man, he was elected to the staff of the London Hospital. At the London he was known as "Bobby Hutch," a name indicating the affection and admiration of many generations of housemen and students. At the Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond Street, he was referred to as "Robert."

In order to think of him at work one has to imagine a tall, slightly stooping, rather gaunt figure, dignified and somewhat austere, but a little sorrowful. His features were aquiline but he had a great liveliness of facial expression. His attitude was striking and dignified, somewhat suggesting that of a prima donna, though, of course, the bearing was in no way effeminate. His mode of thought was strikingly accurate and judicial, and often his choice of words was most fastidious. And then, of course, in the true Scottish tradition he had a beautiful command of English which made his lectures an aesthetic delight and lent great power to his sarcastic wit. He was aware of his position and well conscious of his dignity and of his Scottish upbringing. Sometimes he would say "the value of a history decreases progressively as you go from Banff to Brighton." Each lecture though part of a series was complete in itself, polished, lucid, and informative, and was enlivened with flashes of wit, humorous allusions, a quotation, or an epigram. The lectures were delivered without notes in a low, clear voice with an Edinburgh accent. His kindness and gentleness were hidden by his somewhat austere appearance, formidable sarcasm, and trenchant wit.

He was rather fond of alliteration. Thus he would say, "slender fingers are a great advantage alike to pickpockets, piano players, and percussors." Sometimes at Great Ormond Street he referred to his clerks as "a curious collection of crapulous cretins creeping from crib to crib." At the London he was content to call them "tabetic snails" or "desiccated frogs." In his ward teaching again and again he would insist on gentle palpation of the abdomen and light percussion of the chest. When a new clerk percussed a child's chest he would say: "Hoots, toots, mon, stop! There you go hammering

away at the chest, leaving behind you a trail of broken ribs. You're supposed to be percussing this child's lungs not the cellars in the basement." If a clerk attempted to percuss the lung too low down on the back he would say, "I was not aware the kidney was an organ which lent itself to percussion." He was to a slight extent a poseur, inasmuch as he assumed an attitude of cynicism and of mild contempt for at least some laboratory procedures but this did not entirely reflect his real feeling. And when he reprimanded a junior colleague with the words, "my dear boy, to write about the history of medicine is itself a physical sign of cerebral arteriosclerosis" we knew that he was only teasing.

A lecture on dietetics began: "Gentlemen, you may know a vegetarian because he is full of two things—wind and self-

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righteousness." He used to say, "rheumatic fever is a disease which is commoner in what some ironical humorist has called the working class." In difficult cases of infant feeding he would exclaim, "it's not the food that's wrong, it's the baby." His bedside teaching was superb. On one occasion returning from a holiday he spoke a few words to the patient and turning to his students said: "Gentlemen, in considering the patient's history you must always sort the wheat from the chaff. This patient is slightly confused and has tenderness of the calves on pressure, and notice her address—*The Red Lion*; clearly this is a case of chronic alcoholism."

He was never didactic though perfectly definite, and the brilliance of his diagnosis was often astonishing. He valued common sense and denounced unnecessary investigations and faddiness; his treatment was always practical. On one occasion, with a view to underlining the difference in the way of life between medical and surgical colleagues, he remarked, "during the summer vacation the surgeon is to be found for a period of six weeks leading the fashion in the Upper Engadine, while the physician snatches a bare fortnight to take his family to some boarding-house in Brighton."

Publications

Throughout a period of nearly 60 years Robert Hutchison was a prolific, instructive, and witty writer. His *Lectures on the Diseases of Children* and the *Elements of Medical Treatment* are masterpieces of English prose. His famous *Clinical Methods* reached the 15th edition in 1968 and is still known as the bible of the Membership examination. Innumerable letters appeared under his name in medical journals. In 1934 in the "Battle of the Barbiturates," in which it was suggested that such drugs be dispensed only to a doctor's prescription, he wrote: "They contend that the barbiturates are a ready and increasing means of suicide. Well, Sir, what of it? So is the gas-oven, but no one proposes that the sale of gas-ovens should be restricted to doctors."

All who were privileged to know Sir Robert Hutchison must remember with pleasure many of his sayings. Thousands more who never met him can revel in the dry humour of his writings. Letter-writing he kept up until long after he retired from practice. Thus in 1953 in a letter entitled "Modern Treatment" he wrote:

"I think there should be a new petition in the litany to be read in hospital chapels or wherever doctors and nurses do, or ought to, congregate. It might be as follows: 'From inability to let well alone; from too much zeal for the new and contempt for what is old; from putting knowledge before wisdom, science before art, and cleverness before common sense; from treating patients as cases, and from making the cure of the disease more grievous than the endurance of the same, Good Lord, deliver us.'"

His lectures are full of pearls (as he would not scruple to call them)—"It is quite impossible that you should always be right in your diagnosis, if only for the reason that disease does not always play the game. It is better, however, to be

wrong on sound principles than right by chance. Guessing is to be avoided at all costs; for if once you get into the habit of guessing you are diagnostically damned."

Outstanding Figure

As an erudite physician Bobby Hutch taught us many things, but also as a philosopher he helped us to discover how all these things were good to know and worthy to be told. Always we deeply admired his scholarly approach, and we regarded him as the outstanding figure of contemporary medicine. We are proud to have been his pupils. At the London we remember so well how he stood tall and elegant in his frock coat, with one hand on the curtain rail above the patient's bed. At the end of the ward round when he washed his hands sister offered him scented soap of a special brand, and woe betide the probationer who should offer him ordinary soap. At Great Ormond Street, somehow we think of him in summer garb—the grey frock coat and grey topper. The little girl in the first cot offered him a rose, which he pinned on his coat. With a "Thank you, my dear" he smelt the rose and the ward round began. When his wife was about to present him with a fourth child he was very keen it should be a daughter because he already had three sons. He told us how he laid in a bottle of champagne and a bottle of ginger beer as alternatives to celebrate the occasion. It was a girl—how happily he attacked the champagne.

He was contemptuous of verbosity, pomposity, and niggardly controversy, which he ignored like many other things not worthy of his attention. Those who were privileged to enjoy his friendship realized the kindness and sympathetic understanding which his reticence usually obscured. He was undoubtedly an intellectual giant in his generation, and both the man and his teachings will be remembered for all time. His scholarship and distinction of mind earned him the highest honours that Medicine can bestow. All those whom he taught must feel the truth of that sentence in the Oath of Hippocrates: "I swear by Apollo and Aesculapius to reckon him who taught me this Art equally dear to me as my parents." Of all Hutchison's messages to his pupils this was the greatest—that as medicine becomes more complicated good clinical method grows rather than lessens in importance.

Note: It is important not to confuse Sir Robert Hutchison, Bt., with Sir Jonathan Hutchinson, F.R.S., surgeon to the London Hospital. They were, of course, not related. Jonathan Hutchinson (note the different spelling and pronunciation) first noticed the notched central incisors of congenital syphilis in 1858 and this was 13 years before Robert Hutchison was born. As is shown below, though both served on the staff of the London Hospital, their careers did not overlap, Sir Robert being 43 years younger than Sir Jonathan.

	Born	Assistant Surgeon	Surgeon	Retired	Died
Sir Jonathan Hutchinson	1828	1859	1863	1883	1913
Sir Robert Hutchison	1871	Assistant Physician 1900	Physician 1918	1934	1960